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LAUGHING ODYSSEY

BY

EILEEN BIGLAND

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THE wrapper, map, and illustrations in this book
are all the work of Russian artists

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TO
THE COUNTESS OF CROMER

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For, subtile people may indeed marke more curiously, and observe things more exactly, but they amplifie and glose them: and the better to persuade, and make their interpretations of more validitie they cannot chuse but somewhat alter the storie.

They never represent things truly, but, fashion and maske them according to the visage they saw them in; and to purchase credit to their judgement, and draw you on to believe them, they commonly adorne, enlarge, yea, and hyperbolize the matter.

MONTAIGNE: *Of the Caniballes*

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I also wish to thank my many Russian friends for their hospitality, their unfailing courtesy, and their lively interest in my search for happiness.

And to three grand travelling companions, Professor Simon Michneck, Dr. Philip Lovell, and Mynheer D. Greebe I render homage.

E. B.

August 1937

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CHAPTER I
FANTASTIC JOURNEY

I

I WENT to Soviet Russia in search of happiness.

In England, despite a marvellous trade recovery, people talked about isolation and the imminence of another European war, about income-tax and gas-masks, about the necessity for rearmament and the deplorable state of agriculture. In Holland the Dutch burghers shook square and sensible heads over the Gold Standard, and said how hard was living and how dour their neighbours. In France there were mutterings of stay-in strikes, and governments rose and fell with bewildering rapidity, and prices reached heights which defeated even those Americans who had long ago decided that Paris was the only city in which to die. In Italy a dictator showed civilization how easy it was to wage war against Ethiopia, and how difficult it was to say a Caesar nay. In Spain men talked furtively in cafés, and the word "revolution" formed itself through endless repetition into a theme-song, and the Cabinet looked uneasily towards Morocco and thought of Franco. In Austria there was a vague feeling of unrest and even the gay Viennese had shadowed, hungry eyes. In Germany people spoke a tremendous lot about the Olympic Games and the wheat crop, and not at all about the Führer, and the ex-Kaiser's grandson, clad in S.A. uniform, jingled a collecting-box for an army flag-day, and in the trains elegant gentlemen in emerald green coats made everybody shout "Heil, Hitler!" before confiscating their tobacco.

So I stood on a platform in Charlottenburg station, waiting for the Negoreloje train. The late spring night was cold and a thin rain was falling, but a childish exaltation warmed

me. I forgot my depression at the state of Europe, and the soreness of my body after much third-class travel; I remembered my grandmother's stories of old Russia (there was a particularly exciting one about a butcher who was chased across St. Petersburg and eventually killed with his own carving-knife), and the glowing picture-books full of folk tales, and the fabled beauty of the Black Sea coast. . . .

The train was crowded. Half Germany seemed to be going to Poland. A Jew seized my case and typewriter and swung them on to the rack; then he assured me in bad French that he hated sleeping with Germans so much that he found the presence of an Englishwoman comforting, and would I like to cement our friendship by buying two mugs of Pilsener? Rather dazed by his belief in me as protector of the Chosen Race I produced a reichsmark and waited while he fetched the beer from the platform trolley.

"*Santé!*" The Jew drained his glass at a gulp, rummaged in a paper bag (his luggage consisted of multitudes of paper bags) and presented me with two pippins and a Duchesse pear. "In return for the beer," he said. "You can eat them for breakfast. But tell me, why do you travel with a typewriter and where are you going?"

His curiosity was disarming; the frank desire of a child for explanation of why and wherefore. "The typewriter is with me because I want to write a book about Russia—or rather a book about the Russian peoples; and I am going to Moscow first. After that, well, it depends upon whether I find happiness there or not."

The Jew leaned forward, round black eyes opened very wide. "But *of course* you will. Soviet Russia is the only country in the world which has learnt the serenity of living."

After three months of enduring raised eyebrows and ribald remarks whenever my quest was mentioned these words were as honey in the mouth. "Are you Russian?" I asked.

"I was once," his voice was wistful. "I was born in a

village near Negoreloje. Jews were not liked in Russia then, but my father had a cobbler's shop and we lived fairly well. When my brothers and I grew up we all went voyaging; but then the War came and when we went home afterwards we found our village was no longer in Russia but in Poland—and the Poles hate the Jews worse than the Russians ever did. It is sad—but what will you have? For myself I am a traveller in silk stockings for a firm in Amsterdam and I make a good living. About once a year I have to come to Poland on business, so I go on afterwards to see my people. If I had not to journey through Germany first I should come home more often."

Two men in Storm Troopers' uniform swaggered in from the corridor, interrupting his story with a lot of grumbling. The train was cold, the Mitropa wagon was closed for the night, the compartment was uncomfortable, and we, who had taken the window-seats, were excrescences on the face of the earth. Throwing their belongings on the seats, they marched out, and the Jew lowered the coat-collar he had raised at their entrance. "It is my nose," he remarked plaintively, "always my nose."

I thought of William Blake's "*Why was I born with a different face?*" and wondered if he had visualized Nazi Germany several centuries before its time.

Half a dozen people slid the door open, glanced at the appurtenances of war which bestrewed the compartment, retreated quickly. Very evidently the Storm Troopers were unpopular. "Those are Poles," said the Jew. "They do not like the Nazis, for all the quacking there is about an alliance. But never mind; the troopers will get out at Frankfurt and then we shall be able to sleep."

I asked him what it felt like to leave your home in one country and return to find it in another. He told me it was a dreadful feeling which stayed in your mind even when you had achieved a modest livelihood, a Dutch wife, and a home in Amsterdam. It was like an inoperable cancer you

could not pluck out of your body, and remembrance of it haunted you day and night. "I envy you," he said. "You can go to my land: I am not allowed to cross the frontier."

We began to talk in Russian, and then the Storm Troopers came back, a little drunk, and we shut up like clams. They rolled up their greatcoats and sprawled against them, putting their heavily booted feet against our sides and staring hard at me. Under their scrutiny my nose changed shape, became a hooked emblem of nationality which grew more and more prominent as the train did the round of stations for which Berlin is famous. When we stopped at the Zoo I could bear it no longer and said loudly that I wished I had not tried to save my money for "soft" travel in the Soviet Union by going third-class through Germany.

The soldier next to me dug his heels a trifle harder into my thigh and asked if I spoke German. I said, "No, not at all," and was immediately seized with panic, since my answer in that language proved me a liar. Laboured and ungrammatical explanations (which were true) about my inability to say more than a few phrases did me no good: I was clearly an enemy. Suspicion settled on the compartment like a cloud. The Jew retreated farther behind his collar and the Nazis began to tell each other slowly and distinctly exactly what they thought of foreigners who spoke in strange tongues and had no respect for the Fatherland.

At another time it might have been amusing to try to follow their frank dissection of my character; but the exaltation I had known on Charlottenburg platform had vanished. The wooden slats of the seat bit into my body; the absurd conversation of the soldiers bit into my mind. Cramp attacked first one foot, then the other; appeared suddenly in the left elbow, finally switched into an excruciating crick in the neck. Movement was impossible—the Nazi who held seven-eighths of the available space saw to that. Wedged upright between the window and his boots I glowered at all Germany. The Führer might have given self-respect

back to a nation; in so doing he had surely taken away both its manners and its sense of proportion. This bowing down to militarism, this frightened acquiescence with tyrannical notions, made the activities of the pre-War Pan-German party look anaemic. The whole business of Nazidom, from the hungriness of a pleasant race to the broadcast bellowsings of a dictator, was wrong.

It was so wrong that the crick in my neck grew worse, and I developed fierce thoughts of Russia. The object of my journey seemed ludicrous; what hope had I, who hated the dragooning of people into spiritual, mental, moral, or physical collectivization, of finding happiness in a country which, according to a multitude of opinions expressed by scholarly European and American visitors, had succeeded in eliminating individuality? The thing was purely silly and I should have realized sooner that I was chasing a chimera. Between old and new Russia lay war, revolution, civil war, and famine—a terrible bridge of tragedy that nobody could span.

The train clanked on towards Frankfurt. The Nazis produced sausages, oranges, and beer, and talked steadily between mouthfuls until I wondered whether the noise of their speech was better or worse than their sucking of fruit, and whether this nightmare would ever end, and whether Dirck was sleeping peacefully in his *wagon-lit* farther up the train. . . . The memory of Dirck revived me. Dutch by birth and an accountant by profession, he hid an eager, questing mind beneath a forbiddingly correct exterior. His valises were always new, his taste in hotels impeccable, his tailor English. Once you got over the first shock of seeing Dirck looking exactly the same in the Dolomites as he did in Stockholm, Vienna, or Monte Carlo, you found him an excellent travelling companion for two reasons: his luggage included several small boxes containing the most delectable Dutch cakes and biscuits, and he never took any preconceived ideas along with him when he visited fresh countries.

But my imagination boggled at vision of Dirck's reactions to Soviet Russia. He had a passion for punctuality; he knew more than most about wine and food; and he objected strongly to uncouthness in any shape or form. I knew he would smother these characteristics and approach Moscow with a mind open to receive and assimilate whatever he found there—but he had never encountered Slavs *en masse*: would he be able to endure them? Then I pulled myself up with a jerk. Once again I was thinking of old Russia and forgetting my doubts about communistic living. Probably Dirck would find the Red Army, for example, very similar to the Nazis, whom he detested for their politics but admired for their efficiency.

The train slowed down. The Storm Troopers collected their traps and departed, leaving a trail of empty bottles, dirty newspapers, orange-pips, sausage-skins, and a piercing smell of garlic. The Jew popped up from his coat-collar, borrowed a straw brush from the corridor attendant, swept up the litter, and opened the window. By the time I had helped him by arranging the bottles, like so many grim sentinels, outside the door, I felt better.

"Now!" He seized my coat, wrapped my handbag in it, propped the bundle against the window and told me to use it as a pillow because one had to beware of "jinsters" in Poland. Stretching myself full length on the wooden seat I felt I had never known such a comfortable bed, but the word "jinsters" intrigued me. Who or what were these mysterious creatures? Were they denizens of Poland incapable of being translated into any other language and was my inability to do more than sneeze, spit, and cough when trying to get my tongue around a Polish word going to defeat my efforts to find out about them? Finally I demanded an explanation and learnt the truth—gangsters.

Not even Al Capone could have held any terrors for me. I turned over and went to sleep.

Awakening from exhausted slumber on a wooden bench

is seldom a pleasant process: in this case it was purgatory. From a nightmare in which the Russian butcher operated on me with his carving-knife, while Prince Igor and his wild followers whirled about the table brandishing torches and shouting "Heil, Hitler!" I awoke to sight of a very large German bending above me. "Frontier," he barked. "Declaration of money, valuables, contraband. . . ."

"There is a typewriter," I began dimly, but at that moment my handbag rolled on to the floor, and he pounced. From it he shook contents which shattered him: Dutch guilders, French francs, Italian lire, German reichsmarks, English money, a cheque-book, and an Intourist voucher. Carefully spreading a paper on the seat he made neat little heaps of my various wealth. "Where is your permit?" The awful thing was I hadn't got a permit. For some unknown reason the Customs man at the previous frontier had not asked about money, and I being heavily engaged in telling a merchant from Hanover my admiration for the late President von Hindenburg, had not queried his forgetfulness. There was nothing for it but to put on the half-witted expression that had got me out of Customs troubles before now.

For the first time it didn't work; or rather, it worked in a fashion altogether startling. "She is stupid, dumb!" roared the German, then he whirled about and addressed the Jew. "Is she your woman?"

The Jew bounded a clear foot out of his corner. "My God, no! She has a British passport!"

My only feeling was one of chagrin at such lack of chivalry, but the repudiation had its effect. My passport was scrutinized and handed back; the typewriter went through the usual indignities involved in a vain search for cocaine underneath its keys; the suit-case yielded an unprofitable bag of old clothes, books, and six rolls of toilet-paper. When bought in Surrey these had seemed innocuous enough; here, on the Polish border, they assumed sinister

properties. Seeing a glint in the German's eye I said squeakily that there were no plugs in wash-basins or baths in Russia, and that I proposed to use wads of the paper to act as stoppers.

He looked at the Jew: "She is mad, but harmless. As for her money—well, she must go and argue about that with the superintendent in the shed."

I crawled out into the chill dawn, cursing this country with its rules and regulations. A train from Poland had just come in and the shed was crammed with Germans returning home. They were working-folk for the most part, and all carried bundles containing foodstuffs. The man in front of me in the queue was a sailor who had been across the frontier to bury his beloved and Polish wife. He held a gigantic loaf of black bread, a crock of butter, and a large sausage, and behind him trailed a small and whining boy. Ahead of him were several women who tossed skinny fowls on to the scales and mutely paid the duty demanded for their import.

"Surely those chickens are not worth so much trouble?"

The sailor smiled at me sadly. "Everything eatable is valuable. See this butter? I will pay four or five marks on it; but we cannot buy such food in Westphalia, and my boy needs good fat because he is delicate." He stepped forward and dumped his burdens on the counter, making no protest when the official took the dirty knife he had already used for operating on the chickens and sawed the bread into quarters, churned up the yellow butter, and sliced the sausage. Then he packed his mutilated belongings into a string bag and trailed out with his son.

My turn came next. Three stout men read the note given me by their companion on the train, pawed my money and scratched their heads. Then they all scuttled away into a corner and discussed the matter with an even stouter person who wore lots of gold braid. I studied the clock on the opposite wall. In fifteen, in ten, in five minutes my

train would start. Outside, whistles shrieked and people shouted. At three and a half minutes to train-time I treated the shed to a display of temperament which has made me blush at intervals ever since. The stoutest man shook his fist; I swore fluently in Russian (an accomplishment I have long been grateful for); one of the other officials scrabbled furiously with my money. "See," he yelled, "she has four five-pound notes!"

Suddenly everybody was quiet. The stoutest man seemed to shrink within his magnificent uniform. Snatching notes and coins he stuffed them into my bag and almost threw it at me. "Why did you not say you were English?"

I was too busy swinging myself on to the step of the moving train to answer, "Because I'm not."

II

Germany was behind us. I sat down and ate a pippin in peace, and wondered why the Jew, who snored with his mouth wide open, should have appeared such a friend last night yet look such a grimy and unshaven creature this morning. Above the marshland studded with short, twisted trees the sun rose wearily, as though reluctant to discard the mist which covered him, and the little pools on either side of the track showed green and lilac and gold. Very soon now we should be in Poland—and on the far side of her rolling steppes lay Russia.

Peace had descended upon me a little too early. At Zbaszyn, the station which marked the end of no-man's-land, a brisk individual in blue demanded my handbag once more. He was not interested in money, but my cheque-book enthralled him. "Travellers' cheques: you declare these."

His English was limited to these five words; his German and French were limited to them too. And I know of nothing more maddening than to deliver a long peroration

explaining that you brought your cheque-book with you in a fit of mental aberration, that nobody can get any money for the two cheques left in the book unless they choose to journey all the way to the King's Road, Chelsea, London, and that even then the bank will regard any cheque for over five pounds (which wouldn't pay the payee's fare) with a jaundiced eye, to a stolid Pole who understands not one single word of your speech.

The Jew still snored. My five-pound notes failed to impress the Pole. All the bruises gained from sleeping on wooden seats began to ache and I wished I had gone to Russia by one of those Soviet steamers which are crowded with American and English tourists who profess "left wing" tendencies, and carry little note-books, and have an undying faith in the power of their own language.

Rescue appeared from the corridor in the shape of a diminutive policeman who said brightly, "Passport, please. English, yes, no? You come from London? Do you know the Three Nuns Hotel?"

I nodded mendaciously, whereupon he burst into praise of Holborn. That was a wonderful street—*sehr gemütlich*—and often he had loitered along it shop-gazing when he was a waiter at the Three Nuns. Anybody, such as myself, who knew that hostelry would appreciate how bitterly he had wept when his permit had run out. . . .

It seemed a far cry from Holborn to the Polish Police Force; but I was too tired to work out the transition from the one to the other, and anyway the policeman was far too busy talking to attend to questions. I did manage to ask him for the return of my cheque-book, which he raised to his lips before handing it over with a flourish.

I fell asleep again thinking what a gallant race the Poles were.

The train was slowing down when I sat up with a start to find the sun streaming in at the window. In some previous existence the Jew had reminded me to wake him at Badsau,

and as I saw that name on a signal-box I began my task. I shook him, prodded him, pushed him; all he did was to gurgle and let his mouth fall wider open. The train stopped and an interested crowd of peasants gathered on the platform to watch the fun. Forgetting Polish gallantry I gave the Jew a kick on the shin which drew groans of protest from the crowd and a yelp from him. "Badsau?"

"Yes, hurry! We've been here five minutes already."

I piled his paper bags on him until he looked like Father Christmas, and shepherded him along the corridor. The train was gathering speed as he dropped on to the platform but he ran alongside it, scattering his bags as he went and shouting, "Do not sentimentalize about Russia, I implore you; do not sentimentalize. . . ."

Two and a half hours until the Mitropa wagon opened: time for another sleep. But at the door of the compartment stood three square men in tight dark suits. They said something unintelligible and I grinned feebly, so they entered, lit strong cigars, and placed small, gaudy-coloured cushions on the seats, one for each. One of them spoke a little French, and told me they were going to Warsaw to see a man called Woickowsky on *very* important business, and I wished I knew enough Polish to ask what M. Woickowsky did for a living, and why they were going all that way to see him on a Sunday morning—and wished also that business men journeying from the suburbs to London would get their wives to embroider little cushions for them, and thus prevent that shininess so visible in the back-view of an Englishman.

Polish speech was soothing. If you shut your eyes you could believe you understood most of it. But sleep was hard to woo, and I stared out of the window at the steppes that unrolled, like huge carpets which needed pulling straight before they were tacked down, as far as the horizon. The land was farmed in strips: here a cherry orchard foaming in full bloom, next to it a long stretch of young potatoes,

farther on a bare ploughed field. Even at this hour—not quite six o'clock—bare-footed women in ragged clothing worked diligently with hoes while almost naked children squatted beside them or ran to and fro with bags of seed, but there was a strange absence of male labour and everybody seemed very poor.

It was time I found out something about Poland. An offer of the Duchesse pear, flanked on either side by a bottle of Evian and an unbreakable mug, did the trick with the Pole who had a little French; but first of all I had to hear all about M. Woickowsky. He was, it appeared, a company promoter who financed the factory in Badsau where these three made matches; he was also greedy over money and seven kinds of a murderer; hence this Sunday visit. For on the Sabbath day M. Woickowsky quite rightly took his rest in the bosom of his large family, and one of his sons-in-law was going to let the cushion-brigade in by the back door so that they might pounce on the financier while he was enjoying a snooze in his parlour. After that, I was assured, *anything* might happen.

I hoped politely that more indulgence in murder would be unnecessary; then I asked about agriculture. My friend raised his shoulder. "In Poland the army comes first, industry comes second, the land . . . well, what does it matter?"

He spoke exactly like an English Member of Parliament explaining away the Vale of Evesham. "But in a country as big as this, where you have so few cities and so much land, surely you see the value of all these rich steppes?"

He looked bored. "The peasants do not want much," he said vaguely, and took another mouthful of pear. "The men are mostly in the army and the women manage somehow. Besides, look at our borders: Russia on the one side, Germany on the other. It is not good for ignorant people to realize what goes on beyond those frontiers. Why, only a year or two ago the Government found out that the peasants on

the Ukrainian border were becoming Russianized, so they made them exchange farms with peasants from the Czech frontier. Now these, too, are becoming Russianized—what is one to do?"

I gave it up. There was nothing to do except to laugh at vision of a harassed Government frantically switching peasantry from one end of its domain to the other in an endeavour to combat the Red menace. My mirth did not seem popular, however, and the conversation reverted to the wretched Woickowsky. His ancestry was unspeakable, his children unthinkable. Always anxious to fight for lost causes I reminded him about the traitorous son-in-law, and was rewarded by a chorus of approval from his two friends and the waving of an enormous bunch of bananas before my nose.

"We eat now," said my friend courteously. "But you will not mind if we continue our discussion?"

I munched my banana and hoped fervently they had finished dissecting Woickowsky. They hadn't, and their capacity for bananas was incredible. Watching them I developed a theory that all Poles had been brought up in the West Indies and had only been repatriated so that the products of those islands might be consumed in middle Europe; and half-way through my second banana it was borne in upon me that the whole salvation of a continent might rest upon the apologia of an African race. I had not got so far as Haile Selassie; probably my idea was a combination of hot sun—there had been no warm spring in western Europe—complete weariness, and a surfeit of banana. Whatever the reason the idea grew, became a strident reality that shrieked at me to the tune of *Old Man River*.

A station clock said that the time was five minutes to eight. Ideas faded into eclipse: the Mitropa opened for breakfast at eight!

III

In Mitropa several people sat decorously eating their toast, rolls, and sweet Polish honey. A Foreign Office man told a wealthy-looking Hebrew about the large house he could not afford to keep up, and about his predecessor who had done this journey every month for twelve years; in return the Hebrew reiterated he had a British passport, and was a man of means in London city and had fought in the Great War. A Czech diplomat lectured his young and curious son about the way in which a cosmopolitan should behave. Two serious Danish professors discussed the number of versts that fifty Soviet workers could till in a day, and disagreed violently about the total. An elderly lady of uncertain age, profession, or nationality sat opposite Dirck. She had a tendency to stoutness unrelieved by skin-fitting shorts, puffy pink knees, and hob-nailed boots, and she was terribly in earnest about something which worried her very much.

Dirck said in English: "I told you it was madness to travel third class. You've got straws in your hair and you look like a cat that's been left out in the rain all night; but for pity sake sit down and have your breakfast."

I said: "First-class travel teaches you nothing about Europe. You don't know that the Nazis who are so particular about litter leave their compartment like a shambles; that the people in Westphalia are so hungry that they've got to bring scrawny fowls and bread and butter in from Poland; that this country has a policeman who was once a waiter in the Three Nuns Hotel; that agriculture doesn't count; and that I've eaten an apple and two bananas and don't want anything except coffee."

The lady with the football knees said in French: "Have you ever done a walking-tour in the Black Forest?"

I shut my eyes, swallowed two cups of strong black coffee, looked up to meet her reproachful gaze. "I'm afraid I haven't."

"You must do so. I will give you the address of the bureau in Berlin that arranges personally conducted tours for members of the International Youth Movement. They are splendidly organized: romantic scenery and intellectual companionship."

This was terrible. She looked so pugnacious that we felt she might stop the train at any moment and have us sent back under escort to spend our summer trudging through Thuringia with alpenstocks. We explained quickly that next year, perhaps, we would take advantage of her kind offer; at present we were going to Russia.

"Then we can walk together! That will be so nice, because one feels lonely without friends, and I want to organize a party to walk from Kiev to Kharkov so that we may study the conditions under which the Soviet citizens live, and the work on the State farms, and the magnificent Dnieproges Dam. In the evenings we can have political discussions."

Thought of the immaculate Dirck walking through the Ukraine with this earnest woman and her "intellectual companions" was too much for me. Besides, she had to be stopped. Before we reached Moscow we should be committed to heaven knew what horrors. "You are French, Madame?"

She drew herself up. "I am a Croat."

That explained a lot. The hotbed of hatreds called the Balkans bred people of a strong inferiority complex, people whose tenacious ambitions led them to cling for dear life to the clap-trap of the European intelligentsia because they knew that within themselves lay no original capacity for facile learning. But this particular Croat was barking up the wrong tree; neither Dirck nor myself was likely to help her. . . . Across the aisle the Foreign Office man was debating the best way to smuggle Polish butter into Russia. His conversation smacked less of *Alice in Wonderland* than the one in which we were indulging, so I wriggled from my

seat and left an apoplectic Dirck to deal with Ukrainian hiking.

"When we reach Warsaw will you go to a chap in the Place Napoleon, collect four kilos of butter and bring them back to me?"

I felt heroic and said yes.

The Hebrew snuffled. "You are joking! You can't smuggle butter across the frontier, nor can you ask this lady to run the risk of fetching it for you. Good heavens, man, think of your official position! There'll be the devil to pay if you're caught."

We couldn't make him understand that the penalties involved in the illicit import of a few pounds of butter were so slight that they merely added a vicarious hint of danger to our journey. Besides, as the Foreign Office man pointed out, what was the use of diplomatic immunity if you couldn't eat Polish butter in Moscow?

The Hebrew shook his head. He had all the dislike of his race for anything that savoured of law-breaking. He grew remote, cold, finally retreated to his compartment. The Danish professors gave up discussing versts and grumbled about the fictitious value of the Polish zloty. The Czech diplomat slept and his son made eyes at a very pretty girl who had just come in for breakfast. The Croat spread an enormous map of the Ukraine on her table and Dirck sidled across to join us. He liked the butter idea very much and said he would come with me, while the Foreign Office man interviewed some one who was coming to meet the train. "But we shan't have much time: we only stop for an hour at Warsaw."

Just then the guard came along the coach. There was a breakdown on the line east of the city: we should have three hours to wait in Glowna station. He looked rather astonished when we grinned. . . . Five minutes later we chugged to a standstill.

Seen from Glowna, which is set in a narrow valley filled

with slag-heaps, derelict railway carriages, a feeble trickle which was once a river, and a great deal of mud, Warsaw looked as though some giant had started to pull it to bits in a fit of mad rage and had then forgotten to send anybody to build it up again. On the grey and grassless cliffs that carried the city were ancient motor-cars, twisted piles that were once cement-mixers, old ploughs and reapers, every conceivable sort of scrap-iron dumped carelessly among the ruins of houses and factories. The station itself was full of heaps of sand, loose boards, and temporary kiosks which were in danger of collapse at the slightest touch. Only when you walked the length of the platform and looked east towards the Weichsel River did you see bulbous golden domes and slender green minarets rising against the sky, and realize that the Orient once began at Warsaw.

Three hours seemed a long time. Dirck and I decided we would go to the river first. In our innocence we talked of taxis, but we soon found Warsaw was a city of cabs. The rhythmic beat of horses' hooves echoed in the steep, narrow streets, and we sat perched high in an old-fashioned victoria from which I felt constrained to bow to passers-by. Several years ago the Polish Government had invited English police to visit their city and instruct them in traffic signals, and the result was amazing. One cab appeared at one end of a straight street perhaps an eighth of a mile long. Immediately, at the other end, a dwarf policeman (all policemen in Poland are tiny) straddled himself across the opening. If all the traffic in the town suddenly wanted to turn down this street it would be impossible to do so until the solitary and slow-moving cab had reached the policeman. In short, traffic-control suitable for the Strand or Piccadilly had been applied to a city whose transport consisted of victorias, milk-floats, and lorries, all horse-drawn. So far as I could see in a brief visit, the very small percentage of motor traffic considered itself superbly outside the law.

On the river the wide blue stream was flecked with the

white sails of hundreds of little boats, and on the beaches young Warsaw disported itself since it was Sunday, and work in that gloomy valley by Głowna was forgotten. Finely built army officers, in grey uniforms blazoned with gold, and wonderful black top-boots, strolled decorously with wives clothed from the Rue de la Paix. Artisans in extremely tight-fitting suits dallied with round-faced girls who wore bunchy black frocks covered with white muslin over-skirts, and long, bright-coloured veils to protect their heads from the sun. Young men in bathing-trunks dived from boards and fathers of families slept with their heads in the sand while their children shrieked, fought, and ate ice-cream. . . . But it was better to watch the scene from a distance; when you went too near you saw that nine faces out of ten were pitted with pox.

We ate saucers of pink ice-cream, much to the annoyance of our driver, who kept pointing his whip at a monstrous stucco palace called the Gloria-something, and assuring us that within its portals we could drink *vermouth sec*. Presently we trundled back into the city and came suddenly on the Place Napoleon, a magnificent square in which steamship companies' offices jostled those of essentially English insurance companies. "It reminds me of Trafalgar Square without Nelson or the lions," said Dirck dreamily.

We still had two hours—much too valuable to waste on butter, so I tackled a young man in the Cunard offices and asked him the way to the Ghetto. At the time I put his disturbed manner down to the fact that I had not mentioned booking a passage to anywhere: a quarter of an hour later I knew better.

For the Ghetto in Warsaw is one of the black spots of Europe. It debouched, most surprisingly, from one of the most respectable streets in the city; but once started on its appalling career it sprawled hideously downhill, gathering people, houses, and smells as it went. Its roadways were narrow alleys piled high with refuse in the midst of which

were set wooden stalls crammed with goods. Red flannel petticoats flapped against an advertisement for aphrodisiacs; blue meat—probably goat—attracted the flies which buzzed round crocks of rancid fat; mouldy lemons supported themselves against a pyramid of hard green tomatoes; rotten apples formed a base for a tower of tattered and obscene magazines; ragged *torchon* lace festooned bales of cheap and nasty silks of glaring red, yellow, and purple; bunches of anemones and tulips peered valiantly from beneath a counter laden with flat-irons, felt hats, pots and pans, and gaudy shawls.

The stench made you catch your breath, but the gaunt salesmen were impervious. Yelling, gesticulating, chanting the merits of their wares, they bombarded the crowds of shoppers to buy, while underneath the stalls, sucking slivers of dirty meat or chewing crushed cabbage-stalks, squatted half-naked children of all shapes and sizes.

I spoke to one of them, a six-year old ghost with matted hair and a face crusted with eczema, and it shrank back, one stick-like arm raised to protect itself from the clearly expected blow. But when I chinked a few coppers in my hand it crept cautiously towards me, snatched the pennies and fled to a booth which sold plates of bubbling, greenish stew. Immediately travesties of childhood popped out of the ground all round me, thin little paws outstretched for money. Dirck was furious. "Can't you keep your maternal instinct under control?" he snapped.

I walked on feeling like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Behind me trailed all the children of the Ghetto, chattering like monkeys; ahead of me stalked Dirck, shoulders squared in disapproval. On either side tall houses leaned crazily and nearly every one had a dog's-eared placard in the window informing us in seven languages that strictly kosher food was obtainable within. Open doorways revealed an astonishing confusion of enormous dark women in soiled wrappers, rickety furniture, piles of unwashed crockery, unmade beds,

and bearded men reading crumpled newspapers. Two stalwart females were enjoying a quarrel from two upper and opposite windows. One of them became so incensed that she retreated for a moment, reappeared with a large pail of slops, and dashed the contents into her enemy's face. The enemy then retaliated by throwing a bug-infested pillow, to avoid which I had to flatten myself against the wall. Looking up to see what missile was coming next I saw the faces of both women wreathed in smiles. Honour had apparently been satisfied. The pail and the pillow lay neglected in the refuse.

We emerged from the Ghetto considerably battered.

By way of contrast we took our morning coffee in an elegant tea-shop where Polish women whose stolid figures could not do justice to their miraculous frocks, sipped chocolate frothing with cream, and flirted mildly with their escorts. Suddenly a little bald man in a frock-coat skipped round the tables with an armful of expensive-looking catalogues which he distributed, with a bow and a flourish, to each woman guest. I opened mine curiously: it was an advertisement for contraceptives. Truly Poland was a strange country.

A little later a young man on the far side of a mahogany counter handed us four packages wrapped in brown paper. "All in half-pound packets as the English like," he beamed. "But the sun is hot: I trust they will not melt before you reach the station."

We said airily that we were taking a cab.

The Place Napoleon was cabless. The streets leading from it were deserted. The few visible inhabitants shook their heads, and the young man lost his smile in explaining how impossible it was to telephone for a cab in Warsaw.

We began to walk to Glowna down a slope intended for chamois, each carrying two parcels of butter. Half-way down Dirck remarked that the arithmetic books which told you that a kilo was the equivalent of two and a half English

pounds were wrong; a few minutes later I discovered ominous stains on either side of my flannel skirt; eventually we toiled into the station leaving tell-tale drips of grease behind us.

"And of all the idiots. . . ." said the Foreign Office man.

He hauled us into the train as a policeman came up, sniffed the butter-impregnated air, and walked away. "Don't you know you've lost half the damned stuff?"

We were cross, and hot, and oily. We wished we had lost the lot, and we told him acidly we didn't wonder he had had to meet a man on the train. "Diplomatic immunity," we said nastily.

He apologized and gave us a lunch which effectively destroyed memories of the Ghetto and the butter alike. After it I went back to my third-class fastness to find a large and boisterous Polish family in occupation. They were nice people but they banished all hope of sleep, so I took possession of my window-seat and gazed out at the steppes. . . .

Little woods sprouted hopefully between strips of potatoes, vines, corn and rye. Every few miles were cairns fuzzy with cornflowers and crowned by white stones—I supposed they were charms with which to woo the weather-gods, but probably I was wrong. On the railway embankments grew masses of wild lupins, bigger purple and white clover than I had ever seen, and ragged robin become so grand that I scarcely knew it. Wild orchises of different kinds starred the grassland, and an unknown trailing creeper with bright yellow flowers climbed the dividing fences. At intervals there were shrines, depicting either the Virgin or the Christ, and hedged about with flowering shrubs. Before these the peasant women crossed themselves and I hoped urgently that they would receive the answer to their simple request—good crops and peace in their country.

The black soil near the German border had given place to fine, dark sand which sifted into the train through every nook and cranny, and settled upon passengers and their

belongings. You looked in the mirror, and saw a grime-smearred face; you took one bite at an apple, and tasted a mouthful of grit; you picked up a paper, and were shrouded in clouds of soot; the people who boarded the train at stopping-places were like niggers.

At about five o'clock we panted into a beflagged station where a horse show was in progress, and the Polish family signified, by means of gestures, that they wished to present me with a meal in return for some chocolate I had given them. Enlivened by thoughts of tea I nodded briskly, and the elder son scuttled off in search of sustenance. Within three minutes he returned triumphantly, bearing a tin plate on which rested three pallid and steaming sausages. With the whole family staring at me expectantly there was nothing to do but smile politely and offer the plate to each in turn. They all shook their heads and pointed to my mouth; but I sat miserably until the mother picked up one of the atrocities in her fingers and handed it to me. . . . The eating of those three sausages was agony. They squelched in the fingers, their skins were tough, their taste indescribable, their colour inside bright pink. I chewed hopelessly while the family applauded and the afternoon sun turned the compartment into an inferno. Afterwards I staggered along to the lavatory only to find that prolonged exercise on the foot-pedal below the basin produced a teaspoonful of tepid water which failed to remove sausage-grease. By the time Dirck came to see me an hour later I was hot, sticky, dirty, tired, and in a foul temper.

"Did you see that horse show?"

"It wasn't a horse show. It was a parade of those about to die in the sausage factory."

He regarded me pityingly. "I wish you wouldn't travel third: it is so bad for you. Never mind, we are at Ba."

"What d'you mean—Ba?"

"It is the name of this junction—or at least it looks like Ba. The line branches into three here; one to Negoreloje,

one to Shepetovka, and one to Volochisk. Come along and have some dinner."

I shuddered. Memories of sausage were hard to overcome. "No, I'm too dirty."

"You can wash in my sleeper. The other man has gone."

Rejuvenated by lots of soap and water I actually enjoyed noodle soup and *Wiener Schnitzel*.

The Foreign Office man had packed the butter into a suit-case, had put this on the rack and had gone to sleep beneath it. On awakening he had found that not only was a fine piece of pigskin spattered with oily stains but that he himself was liberally anointed after the manner of kings at their coronations. The Hebrew had departed at Ba, muttering warnings against the folly of smuggling. The Czech diplomat looked nervous and his son gloomy. The Croat had gone into a huddle in a corner with an American schoolmistress who told her impressions of European trains in a piercing treble. A new arrival was a tall and very well-dressed Englishman who was going to Moscow on business and hoped to return in three days' time, although he carried a book of Intourist vouchers sufficient to provide him with food, hotel accommodation, and sight-seeing trips for a fortnight. "I can always get a refund if I don't use them," he said carelessly.

He was a nice man; but too rich for us.

The Danish professors came in to inquire anxiously whether it would be possible to send telegrams to their respective wives from Negoreloje. They behaved like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the one saying half a sentence and the other finishing it for him.

"Our wives are sisters . . ."

"They are staying together in Copenhagen."

"I live in Vienna since I retired, but . . ."

"I have chosen the Hague."

"We did not bring our wives to Russia . . ."

"Because we felt the travel would be too uncivilized for them."

"We think everybody ought to see Russia . . ."

"But we do not think we shall like it."

Following this conversation was rather exhausting.

Dessert consisted of green strawberries (the Poles like them unripe), so Dirck and I went to stand in the corridor. The steppes had given way to great forests of pine, and above the trees the afterglow faded and the sky deepened to a clear, dark blue. Both of us knew a queer sense of excitement: we were drawing near to the frontier. . . .

At Scapee a neat little Mongolian captain in the khaki of the Red Army came along the train asking to see our money. When we greeted him in Russian a flicker of life lit the immobility of his face for a second. He showed no interest in my collection of currencies, but wrote me a receipt at once. The train crawled on through no-man's-land, and a Pole collected our passports. Dirck and I leaned far out of the window and looked ahead to an archway over the line that bore the letters C.C.C.P. Above it the Red Flag streamed; beside it rose two high towers with platforms on which stood soldiers with fixed bayonets. Beyond these towers fences stretched as far as the eye could see, and in the long grass of the embankments khaki figures lay on their stomachs, rifles ready in case of need. I felt sorry for any one without a passport who tried to enter Soviet Russia.

A gateway under the arch swung open and the train steamed through. The strips of crops disappeared and in their stead a vast field of wheat reached to the horizon. Out of the gathering dusk lights sprang up from the dimly silhouetted, flat-roofed houses of Negoreloje and a moment later we drew up in its station. On the platform three policemen in white helmets and blouses, navy riding-breeches and black top-boots saluted the train: behind them the entire frontier population squatted on their baggage, waving gay handkerchiefs and caps in welcome. Some of them had waited two or three days for trains to Stalingrad, Baku, Chelyabinsk, Irkutsk; some of them would wait

several more days; all were happy. Armed with large kettles, pieces of uncured ham, lots of sour gherkins, and multitudes of children, they gathered twigs from the surrounding woods, cooked their food, exchanged jokes with their neighbours, repeated "in a few minutes" (which is the Russian equivalent for "next century"), and settled down to living on Negoreloje station with the philosophy of their race. After all, one could live as comfortably there as anywhere else—and if the May nights turned treacherous there were always the waiting-rooms.

As I stepped from the train I realized that the very air was different from that of the rest of Europe. It was rich, thick, full of the strange aroma of Russia. Two essentials of the country had not changed: its smell and its disregard for time. I seized the typewriter and marched into the Customs shed. . . . I had come home.

IV

Two Red Army men examined the luggage, a leisurely process during which I leaned against the counter and taught a third soldier the English lettering on the typewriter. The P's and B's intrigued him so much that we had to type pages of them on the backs of official forms while an admiring audience gathered. Presently Dirck arrived, looking worried. "Nobody knows when the train for Moscow leaves, and I only got twenty-five roubles for a pound sterling. These Russians are very courteous and charming, but they lack *method*."

My pupil said: "My comrades have yet to look through your papers—they must do that even though they can't understand your language. Why don't you take your friend to the buffet for a glass of tea? I will take care of the typewriter and try to master why I should put R instead of P and V instead of B."

It was an ingenious idea; but what amused me more was

the expression on the faces of the comrades who were studying an unfinished biography of Mary, Queen of Scots.

I changed a pound into roubles with Dirck grumbling into my ear that we were already three hours late, and that the time-table said we should have left for Moscow at 9.30.

"When *does* the train go, anyway?" he finished.

The Russian spell was already working. "In a few minutes," I lied cheerfully.

We walked to the buffet through an enormous vaulted corridor and joined the Foreign Office man who was sitting under a palm drinking *piva* (which is like American near-beer gone flat). He told us triumphantly that the seals on his butterfly case remained unbroken and asked if we had a beer-opener. I had, but although I did not know at this stage that it was to prove more useful than much fine gold, some vague instinct warned me not to let it out of my sight.

"What do you want it for?"

"To open beer with on the train."

"I'm sorry, but I'll need it myself for Narzan water. By the way, where's the Croat?"

"Still croating. My God, what a woman! She's in the Intourist bureau driving them all white-headed."

Poor Croat, who expected walking companions to spring fully armed from underneath Negoreloje station and suffered such disappointments from people like us. I sipped fragrant tea that had lost none of its flavour through sea-shipment and felt tender towards her.

The feeling did not last. When I had retrieved the typewriter, Mary of Scots, and the suit-case from the Red Army there she was beside me, knees a little more puffy and face a little more vacuous than heretofore. "This is a terrible country." She wrung fat hands. "I asked Intourist what time the train left and they did not know; then I asked if we were not due in Moscow at ten o'clock on Monday morning, and they said there were no Mondays in Russia. What did they *mean*!"

"Since they have abolished Sundays the Soviets no longer use names for the days of the week: they use dates only."

"I cannot understand," she said flatly. "Monday is Monday, and Tuesday is Tuesday, and . . ."

A porter appeared, strapped our combined baggage on his shoulders and cantered off with it, whereupon the Croat gave a yelp and set out in pursuit.

"There is no hurry," said the Red Army. "Tell me, have I got your alphabet right?"

A full ten minutes had gone by before I climbed on to the Moscow train. The Danish professors informed me that . . .

"We are going to dine: such a queer hour . . ."

"But all our friends are in the dining-car."

The Polish sausages, overlaid by tea, were doing queer things to my inside, else I might have joined them. Instead, I went in search of my porter and found him standing guard outside a closed compartment. "Very nice," he beamed, "all ladies together," and slid open the door to reveal the Croat telling her beads in a state of mild undress.

I shut the door and retreated down the corridor. "Listen to me. I refuse to travel with that woman. Is there no other sleeper on the train?"

He blew on his fingers and two harassed attendants came rushing up. "Citizeness, there is only one coach for 'soft' travel, and every berth is full."

For the past forty-eight hours I had dreamed of my comfortable bed on the Moscow train. But a week of wooden benches was better than a night with the Croat. "I will go third."

"You mean 'hard'?"

"Yes, third class."

The attendant looked puzzled. "We have no classes; we have the International Sleeping-cars, and the 'soft' travel, and the 'hard' travel."

We walked along the train. The International Cars were

similar to the Continental *wagons-lits* only slightly more decorative; but why they were called "international" defeated me. The "soft" coaches were, as I already knew, very like first-class sleepers elsewhere. Then the attendant led the way between three tiers of wooden racks mounted on either side of a central aisle. On the racks were most of the people we had seen on Negoreloje platform. Children chattered, whimpered, or slept. Their mothers brought boiling water from the kitchen and made tea. Their fathers chewed sunflower seeds, read *Pravda*, played cards, mouth-organs and piccolos—and spat. A baby fell with a plop from the topmost rack and climbed up again by holding on to a selection of stockinged feet. A Tatar offered me a slice of gherkin on the end of a carving-knife. The smell of Russia intensified itself a hundredfold, billowed towards me in great waves. I said faintly, "is this the 'hard' coach?"

"Oh, no," said the attendant earnestly. "This is just travel."

We found an empty "hard" compartment and he pulled a striped mattress out of the box-seat. This wasn't so bad; but I peered rather closely at the mattress.

"Do not worry, Citizeness. There are very few bugs in the Soviet Union."

We both grinned, and he said good night as the train moved out to the strains of *The Merry Widow* waltz, blared from the station loud-speaker which punctuated every eight bars with the information we should not reach Moscow until noon the next morning.

For the first time in days I was alone—glorious feeling. More wonderful still, I could at last remove my garments and go to sleep comfortably. But no sooner had I got into pyjamas and settled down than the door slid open and in walked a passport officer. He handed me back my passport after scrutinizing it. "You do not look your age," he remarked pleasantly. I thanked him and he went on, "It isn't right you should be in here when you have paid for a

sleeper, but I'm not surprised you refused to travel with that woman—she is a terror!”

He sat down on the end of my mattress and suggested tea, which the attendant brought along. Then he asked me many questions about English grammar, which he was studying in his spare time. In return I dragged out my *Hugo* and asked him about my Russian verbs, which were very shaky. We were getting along famously when he jumped up, exclaiming that he still had most people's passports to return and that he had to leave the train at Minsk. Before he left he spread my coat over me, put out the light, and removed the tea-glasses.

I wondered what my grandmother would have thought of a passport officer who studied English syntax and had two children at Moscow University—then I went to sleep.

I awoke to an invasion. Two sailors, a man in a white blouse, a very fat woman, and three children were staring at me. I sat up, blinked, and asked where we were and what they were doing.

“She speaks!” said a small boy admiringly. Very evidently he regarded all foreigners as strange dolls.

“It is all right, Citizeness,” soothed the sailors. “Go to sleep again. You are at Minsk.”

I groaned for my vanished peace. Two children sat on my feet and the rest of the company clustered on the opposite seat, making loud remarks.

“She has trousers on!” said the small boy.

One of the sailors nudged the fat woman. “See, Mother, they are made of silk.”

She leaned forward and stroked my arm. “The stuff must cost a great deal of money?”

“About twenty-five roubles for the suit ready-made.”

There was an uproar. Such silk in Russia would cost that much a yard. Wool and cotton were also dear. The man in the blouse grew so agitated that he removed this garment in order to let me see the poor quality of his vest, for which

he had paid thirty-five roubles. "But you see," said one of the sailors, "our Stalin says we must wait for good cheap clothes until we have provided our country and ourselves with all necessities of life. He is right."

The storm subsided. Everybody beamed, and the small boy tickled my bare toes.

Suddenly the attendant rushed in, followed by his assistant. "Quick, quick! Another coach has been shunted on to the train."

He grabbed an armful of my clothes and the typewriter, while his comrade seized my case, stockings, and corsets. I yelled frantically to them to wait but they had gone, so I had to career after them. The plain "travel" coach paid no attention to us, but when we plunged through the dining-car I was acutely conscious of the picture presented by a pyjama-clad female chasing two men who displayed her most intimate garments dangling from their arms.

A door was opened and I was bundled inside, while three sets of Russian grunts greeted me. "There you are," hissed the attendant. "The lower bunk on the right. Your clothes are in the rack."

I crawled between cool sheets and closed my eyes.

V

In brilliant sunshine Dirck and I breakfasted together the next morning. I felt serene. Several hours of dreamless sleep had cured my tiredness, and the three grunTERS had turned out to be most delightful people who gave me early tea, lots of information, and a very genuine welcome to their country. The omelet was good, and the black bread better, although the butter looked and tasted like lard.

Dirck was a little sad. He wanted desperately to like Russia, but he couldn't feel sympathy for waiters who served dinners until three in the morning and then closed the dining-car until eleven o'clock; nor could he approve the

chattiness of porters, attendants, and passengers. "And they ought to give the workers better accommodation. Have you seen that awful cattle-truck down the train?"

"Yes, but they don't mind travelling that way. If you put them into first-class compartments they wouldn't be able to do their cooking, and they'd spit sunflower seeds all over the place, and they'd feel unhappy."

"Rubbish," said Dirck rudely. "They ought to be trained."

"You can't train a hundred and seventy millions all at once," I objected mildly. "Anyway, I like them as they are—nice and homely."

We stopped at a little station bright with flowers and I leaned from the window to buy a cabbage-leaf filled with tiny red strawberries from a girl who had an enormous basketful. Up the platform strolled my friends, the sailors. "We have looked everywhere for you, Citizeness, to return this."

"This" was a hair-grip (twelve for a penny in Woolworths).

Even Dirck had to admit such honesty was a sterling quality.

The Danish professors bore down upon our table.

"Such an astonishing thing happened last night . . ."

"While we were having our dinner."

"A woman in pale blue pyjamas walked through the car . . ."

"And in front of her were two men in uniform carrying all—er—*all* her clothes."

"We thought she must be somebody very important . . ."

"Perhaps the wife of a Commissar."

"What do you think?"

I looked steadily at my plate. "I expect it's just an old Russian custom."

CHAPTER II
ROSE RED CITY

I

FROM a room on the sixth floor of the Soviet Foreign Office I looked down on Moscow. New skyscrapers reared themselves beside old houses; sounds of building clanged through the hot air; the sun blazed on streets which were full of pot-holes, but bordered with wide, clean pavements; trams clattered, bells rang, cars hooted, people scurried about their business. . . .

Behind me a voice said: "I wonder what you think of it all; if it is better or worse than you expected?"

"I'm not sure yet. I feel rather as though I were looking at a beautiful peasant girl who had suddenly turned sophisticated and waved her hair and learnt how to use cosmetics. Ask me again in a few weeks' time."

"There is one thing you must remember: we have a far lower standard of living here than anything you know in Europe. But then we can only count back a few years—say ten at the outside. Before that there was ruination everywhere."

Ten years in which to rebuild a vast country, in which to start derelict mines, factories, heavy industries of all kinds; in which to lay tracks, organize railways, begin to make roads, supply the people with food, education, clinics, amusements. . . . The thing was incredible.

"What do you want to see in Moscow?"

"Anything, everything. But I want to go where I like."

My companion smiled. "You only see what they want you to see," he quoted. "I thought you were too sensible to believe that cliché?"

I smiled back, and asked him a question I was certain

would meet with refusal. He sat down and wrote me out a permit without hesitation. Then I said, "I want to wander round the slums."

His mouth tightened. "You won't find many: we have pretty well cleared them out. But if you go off on your own and get into trouble don't blame me."

"I won't. You can come and throw buns at me in Lub-yanka. Tell me, what is the lowest wage the workers get?"

"A hundred roubles a month in the cities, but don't turn that into sterling or you'll get a wrong impression altogether. No outsider can gauge the buying value of the rouble correctly. Besides, the workers have extra allowances for various things and their rents are nominal. If you want to see some of the aids they do get, go to the clinic at the far end of October Street and the doctor will show you round."

We said good-bye, and a Red Army man escorted me down in the lift, taking my special entrance pass from me at the door. He was a nice boy with a cheery red face and a dirty tunic open at the throat, which accorded ill with his fixed bayonet. I told him that in England he would be arrested for slovenliness, but he only laughed at me. "Our Stalin says those little things do not count."

Walking along the crowded street I didn't feel quite sure about that. I couldn't imagine Stalin with his collar undone.

In Sverdlova Square it was so hot that I turned into the Metropole café, which is separated from the street only by a network of trailing vines, ordered an ice-cream and bought a paper. The articles intrigued me: they were from workers all over the Union and they discussed the programme for the New Constitution. The foreman of the May 1st Bakery in Odessa said he was the son of a *kulak*, but that he was so overcome by the knowledge that he would now be able to vote and hold State office that he would fight in the front ranks of the army if needed to defend his beloved country. Four Peoples' Judges from Kiev disagreed with Article 109. A bloodthirsty person called Sakharov demanded that all

loafers, grafters, and people who maliciously suppressed self-criticism should be regarded as enemies of the people, and added to Article 131. An oil-worker of fifty from Guriev wrote: "It used to be that they threw you out like a worn-out rag when old age came . . . but now I have a right to material security in my sickness or disability I can look old age straight in the eye."

They threw you out like a worn-out rag. . . . I put the paper down and looked out at the square. Men in white blouses strode purposefully, women trotted along smiling and carrying tiny bunches of wild flowers, children played behind the water-carts, ragged but happy, a group of girl builders swaggered past in mud-stained dungarees, a Don Cossack sailed into view, splendid in his black and red. All these people looked eager, confident, as though they were working for some fine end: they did not look in the least as if they would ever become oppressed, wretched, and timid.

I walked along to the top of the Ulitsa Gorkovo, where the traffic lights look like Chinese lanterns and the white-bloused policeman clicks his heels as he turns on his little black stand, and wondered if I should go across to the Hotel National and rest in my palatial room which looked out on to the Chinese wall of the Kremlin. One side of me said my feet were tired, and it would be nice to rest before going out to dine with friends, and that I could easily tell the time from my window by the clock on the Kremlin tower. The other side of me said it was criminal to rest in Moscow—it won. I turned up to the Red Square.

Why was St. Basil so beautiful? If you analysed it it seemed rococo, almost grotesque: seen from the far end of the square it was the most superb building imaginable. The intricate tracery on its red walls, the glitter of its golden domes, the sharp wonder of its spire; these things were unforgettable. Then I looked to the right and saw the sweep of rose that was the Kremlin wall topped by the spires of her three cathedrals, while in the forefront Lenin's tomb

gleamed in the sunlight. (Strange that this marble resting-place of a twentieth-century dictator should rest beneath the very heart of Tsardom; stranger still that it should look as exquisite as that heart.)

The colossal square, set with humpy paving-stones, was full of people who stood in a vast, snaky queue, five abreast. For it was almost five o'clock, and Russia had come to pay her nightly homage to her dead leader. White Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Mongols, Tatars, Uzbeks, Turks, Jews; there they stood patiently waiting for the guards to open the doors. I took my place among them—so long was the queue that I was right beside G.U.M., the State Universal Store. Presently we moved on, very slowly. There was no disorder, no laughing, scarcely any speech. Even the children seemed subdued. The hands of the clock on the Kremlin tower pointed to 6.30 before we reached the doors of the tomb. Red Guards, their heads bowed above their rifles, lined the dimly lit steps, and with every pace we took the air struck a shade more coldly. In single file we passed into the underground chamber where Lenin lay under a flood-lit glass case, dressed in khaki. One withered hand was clenched in a frightening semblance of the salute he perfected while living; the body was pathetically small; but the great domed forehead and the chin jutting forward under the pointed beard were those of genius. . . .

Almost every evening while I was in Moscow I went to Lenin's tomb fascinated, not by the embalmed body of a dictator, but by the expressions on the faces of those who passed him. Oh, I knew all the stories floating around Europe; how the tomb was closed occasionally for a week while they re-embalmed him; how the drains had once overrun and flooded the tomb and they had to remove Lenin and substitute another corpse; how all the flood-lighting and the marble and the guards were simply to impress an ignorant people. None of those things, true or untrue, could account for the complete veneration with

which the peoples he had led through years of horror regarded him; nor could his physical bravery when wounded in Leningrad account for their attitude. The thing went deeper than that. The Russians, mystics despite their new philosophies, had to worship something, had to have a god-like figure before whom they could bow. Bereft of orthodox religion—and study of the activities of the Greek Church in Russia for many years before the Revolution helps one to understand just why that bereavement came about—they were forced into search for a shadow to replace a substance. They found their shadow in a dead Lenin. Incongruously enough, the man who overthrew the power of Christianity in Russia has become a very Christ. People in Europe look shocked; say that worship of Lenin is wrong and indecent: I cannot agree with that view. Knowing the Russian mentality I say that it is a far better thing for the Soviet Union to bow to Lenin than to stop bowing altogether. I go farther and say that history provides many examples of this tendency to worship a figure rather than a creed after a Church has been disrupted. In Scotland they once worshipped John Knox infinitely more than they did his preachings: in Wittenburg they worshipped Martin Luther. Russia, who has suffered more, possibly, than any other nation has ever suffered in quest of her ideals, chooses to worship Lenin. Some day, probably not in my lifetime, she will change that worship. For myself, I think she will revert to some form of Christianity; but until the Soviets have either perfected their work or been forced, by outside influence, to retard it, it is impossible to speak sincerely about religion in Russia.

Meantime the shadow of a little man in a marble tomb casts its length over one-sixth of the earth's surface.

II

After my first visit to Lenin's tomb I strolled up the square to the gateway below the Kremlin tower. The

snaky queue still stretched hopefully in the distance, but before St. Basil there was an empty space. Leaning against the wall I gossiped with the guards, who told me that if I waited a few minutes I might see something. The gates were open and I squinted up the drive which led to the Hall of Receptions.

It seemed deserted. The guards offered me sunflower seeds, which I took out of politeness and scattered on the ground so soon as they were not looking: in return I gave them chocolate and H.B. pencils, which they stowed away in their pockets "for the children." It was very peaceful in the evening sunshine with one's back against a wall built by invaders of centuries ago; and I began to dream about the rulers who had lived, exulted, and died in the Kremlin. Cruel, weakly, arrogant, kind, the Tsars of Holy Russia had passed through this gateway, issued decrees of varying severity from rose-red sanctuaries, lived lives of war, peace, and ceaseless combat against forces they could, or could not, control. Here Peter the Great had plotted to bring culture to his Empire and power to his sword. . . . What a marvellous revolutionary the man would have made. . . .

Down the drive swept four American cars. In the first, four Red Army officers sat squatly; in the third, a broad-shouldered man in darker khaki sat between two men in lounge suits. His face was square, heavily moustached, Asiatic; but as he turned to acknowledge some remark of his companion, a kindly, radiant smile flashed out. Yosif Visarionovich Dzugashvili (alias Stalin) was finished with work for the day.

All the way to the Ulyanovskaya Ulitsa, where I was dining, I pondered the problem of this man's greatness, and wondered what might not have happened had he and Tsar Peter been born in the same generation. . . . But we were in 1936, and Peter had been old bones these many years, and a Georgian boy trained for the priesthood in Tiflis stood omnipotent, a gigantic figure in peaked cap, greatcoat, and

field-boots, above every office, every factory, every theatre, every park in Russia.

My host was a Soviet writer, a man of brilliant intellect and wide knowledge. "Does Stalin really live in the Kremlin?" I asked.

"Perhaps not," he answered enigmatically. "What does it matter? His private life is surely his own?"

That seemed an extraordinarily sane point of view; but it was one which my limited experience of dictatorships had not taught me, and I said so.

"But our Stalin is more than a dictator: he is the secretary, virtually the leader, of the Communist Party. Probably you have been listening to speeches made by European agitators?"

There it was again, the oblique Slav answer which defeated argument. These Russians talked politics with all the effortless ease they brought to their chess-games. "Check to your Queen," I murmured.

He laughed, poured me some vodka, and went on: "I apologize. I forgot that you, too, had learnt your chess from a Russian. Now I will be serious about Stalin. The general public do not know where he lives when he is not at his house near Usova-Arkangelskaya, but the idea that he stays in the Kremlin is a legend sponsored by foreign journalists who wish to impress their readers with startling truths about the Soviets. He has had several homes in Moscow—probably he has another now. I heard the other day he had married for the third time and that his bride was the daughter of an important Commissar; but there are always these rumours and one pays little attention, for they have nothing to do with one's wholesale admiration for his achievements."

"If Lenin had lived . . .?"

"Ah, there you have me guessing! Lenin was the genius who thought out the plan of regeneration, the visionary, the student. Stalin is the genius who has put the plan into

effect. I doubt, if Lenin had lived, whether he would have been able to do what Stalin has done—steel was not part of his make-up, nor had he Asiatic blood. But you will meet many people and see many things during the next month or two, which will help you gain an individual viewpoint much more valuable than my second-hand chatter. Tell me, what is the Hotel National like?"

He was an infinitely finer chess-player than I shall ever be.

Dinner was at nine o'clock. The dining-room was hermetically sealed, and the atmosphere, thanks to window-stands of ferns on which the sun had been beating all day, was that of a greenhouse. Above our heads a radio screamed: "*I want to be happy . . . I want to be happy . . .*" and this, combined with the fact that I was horribly aware of perspiration soaking through my thin silk frock, made conversation stilted for a short time. Caviare restored my balance, but when my hostess appeared with huge platefuls of *bortsch* I lost my grip again. In this heat . . .?

"I am proud of my *bortsch*. It has the fruit-juices in it." She set a large bowl of sour cream beside me and looked expectantly for my approval.

I took one swallow and felt like the Cheshire cat, for that soup was ambrosia. Never again, throughout a Russian summer of soaring temperatures, was I to forsake my *bortsch*; indeed, I became a connoisseur grumbling at the lack of beetroot in one house, the paucity of cabbage in another, the tinny flavour of fruit-juice in a third, the skimpiness of the lump of meat in a fourth. (But on that night in Moscow I was laying, unknown to myself, the basis of an increase in weight of two stone which was to send me back to England in the autumn as the Woman Whom Nobody Knew). Replete, forgetful of my appalling physical state, I waited eagerly for the next course. It was black game, shot in the Caucasus, and it had climbed Kasbek before meeting with its untimely end. Wrestle with a wing-portion as I might I could not extract one ounce of nourishment.

"All Europeans like salad." Out came the gherkins, the unripe small cucumbers, the green tomatoes, and the tasteless lettuce.

Comatose after my soupy orgy I agreed, and nibbled lazily while listening to instructions as to how to get to the market. There I would find the most beautiful and varied flowers, fruits, and vegetables; there I would see the wonderful result of collective farming. Host and hostess swayed rhythmically as they described the pleasures in store for me.

It was a relief when the inevitable ice-cream was handed round, because I dared not say I had already visited the market and been upset by the display of tough, small radishes, shrivelled greens, and tired bunches of a very illegitimate form of lilies of the valley.

After several glasses of tea we climbed into a car that looked like a Ford but was a Russian-built machine with magnificent leather cushions, remarkably few springs, and synthetic rubber tyres. "We will go to dance at the Metropole," said my hostess. "It is the eve of Rest Day and you will see how we enjoy our holidays."

By night Moscow was a fairy city in which coloured lights gleamed like jewels against an indigo sky, and muddy roadways and squalid houses were hidden in the shadows beyond the flood-lit skyscrapers. We jolted into the Red Square and saw the Kremlin rise, shimmering and lovely as a mirage seen in the desert. Bringing their innate artistry to bear upon a modern development of electricity, the Russians had concealed ugly arc-lamps behind the trees which lined the terraces below the walls and trained the lights upon their rose-red stones, upon the watch-towers, upon the silver mass which was the Hall of Receptions, upon the delicate spires of the cathedrals. . . .

After such beauty, the restaurant of the Metropole came as rather a shock. It was a vast room, lit by a great many glittering and vulgar chandeliers and decorated with atrocious

pillars in mottled marble twined about with stucco trimmings of laurel-leaves in green and gold. On a platform at the far end twenty energetic musicians played two-year old American dance-music with enormous gusto and a surprising appreciation of its rhythm. In the centre half a dozen naked stone ladies surrounded by palms, potted begonias, and ferns, frolicked round a fountain which sprayed red, white, and blue water at them. Every table seemed full; all the people talked loudly and incessantly; decrepit waiters bustled about with tin trays held high above their heads; the noise was deafening and you had to yell if you wanted to be heard at all.

We sat down at a table already occupied by a colossal Mongol policeman who swept his revolver off the cloth with a courtly gesture when I took the seat next to him. Then he went on tearing a long loaf of white bread into pieces, throwing them into his soup and eating vigorously. (Years of starvation do not breed nice table-manners.) Between gulps he talked to my host, and when he found out I was a visitor he waved his spoon at me. "I like the European women. When I have finished my soup we will dance."

An aged waiter toddled up. He wore an extremely dirty white coat, striped morning-trousers, and torn sand-shoes. "White salmon, white bread, Tokay—in a few minutes." He dodged away. I wondered for the fifth time if all the Russian aristocracy had left their morning-trousers behind them during the Revolution. There seemed to be no other explanation for the dress common among Soviet waiters.

"You like the jazz?" asked my hostess.

"Not here. You have such lovely dances of your own that it seems a shame to substitute these cheap modern shufflings."

She looked a little anxious. "But our children like them; besides, they are a sign of progress. Our Stalin says . . ."

I remembered the requests of my own children for bicycles, television sets, cinema-parties—all the excitements

of the post-War age and answered hastily, "Oh, yes, I suppose it is progress." But to myself I thought, "Yosif Visarionovich, what are you doing? There is a limit to human capacity for education; the brain cannot stand more than a certain amount within a certain period, not even the Russian brain for which I have profound admiration. Have you not reached that limit with this introduction of jazz?" The thought was so dreadful that I lapsed into gloom. Imagine the whole of the Soviet Union, with its stupendous achievements, its breath-taking vitality, its Red Army and its amazing advance in civilization, being brought toppling to the ground by an absurdity like modern dance-music.

"... *walking my baby back home*," screamed the band.

"Come along!" The Mongol had finished his soup, and I heaped coals of fire on my own head as I followed him on to the small, circular dance-floor. For the next ten minutes, I am sorry to say, I forgot all my views about the Soviets. With my nose buried in the policeman's blouse I knew the rare joy of a perfect partner, and the band, inspired by heaven knew what agency, switched into the *Blue Danube*. As we went back to our table I felt that never again would I waltz quite so marvellously.

"She can dance, that one," said the Mongol; and set about a huge pork chop which had arrived in his absence. "When I have finished this we will dance again."

Our Tokay was poured out by the waiter. It was sweet, cloying, and bogus, and it was served in sherry glasses. The white salmon and the white bread would come—in a few minutes.

I looked about the room. Opposite me, grotesquely reflected in the mirror behind her, was my floor-manageress from the National, a voluptuous and obviously peroxidized blonde who suffered an inability to send telegrams correctly. Her companions were a small, twittering woman whom I had seen occupying an arm-chair on the landing beside her

friend, and a minute Japanese who paid for everything. As both blonde and twitterer demanded three cocktails apiece (paid for in roubles, of course) before they waded into caviare (one pot for each), I went cold all over at thought of the cost in Japanese yen. Besides, there was no glamour about the thing: blonde and partner wanted a night out—and got it. The Japanese didn't count, he was just a little machine which produced hundred-rouble notes at intervals. Probably, when he got back to Japan, he would regale his friends with accounts of Arabian nights in Moscow; but that seemed poor compensation for the pleasure of watching two Soviet citizens devouring quantities of expensive food.

At the next table were two young couples; the boys unshaven and dressed in shabby clothes, the girls in light flowered frocks of cheapest voile, their faces smothered in powder, their feet squeezed into flimsy high-heeled shoes. All four were hilarious and were pelting each other with peony petals, but I noticed that the girls were making a tremendous effort to appear sophisticated, un-Russian, very 1936.

Farther on four enormous men with shaved heads were eating goose stolidly while a temperamental youth with a golden beard scolded them furiously for their lack of interest in some musical project he had afoot. Behind me a boy and girl were quarrelling because she had danced with another man, and beside our table a man and woman argued fiercely about her lateness in keeping an appointment. In another country all this anger would have led to blows—but this was Russia. Within five minutes the musician had draped an affectionate arm round a goose-eater's neck, the couple behind were holding hands, the lady who had been late was toasting her swain in vodka.

"Come along," said the Mongol. We danced once more.

Exactly two hours after we had ordered our food it came. The white bread was doughy and full of carraway seeds, and the white salmon was like a slab of marble covered in

vinegar. No amount of sawing with knife and fork made the least impression on it, so I copied my host, lifted it in my fingers—and sucked. Very soon I came to the conclusion that Russian teeth were a great deal stronger than mine.

The room grew hotter, fuller, noisier every minute. The band handed their instruments to another twenty players, and the waiters gave up the attempt to serve anybody, sat down under the palms and smoked cigarettes. I tangoed dreamily with the Mongol, scarcely able to keep my eyes open.

At 3 a.m. I suggested tentatively that it was time I went back to my hotel. Nonsense. The night was but a chicken yet: the idea of bed an absurdity not to be considered. Besides, several friends had arrived and I must dance with them and tell them my impressions of Russia.

The next hour was a confused jumble of questions. Why did we still have a monarchy in England? Why was Mr. Eden flirting with the Nazis after the pleasant speech he had made on his visit to Moscow? Why had we hung Roger Casement? Why hadn't we policed Germany more effectively after the War? Why had we so much unemployment? Why had we been fools enough to spend so much on Geneva? Why . . .? Why . . .? Why . . .?

Even at the best of times my brain is non-political. In the early hours of the morning, with a long and crowded day of new impressions behind me, it simply refused to function at all. If my friends had asked me what I thought of their country I might have been able to talk like a gramophone record for several minutes; but what they really wanted was information about Europe in general and England in particular. My answers must have made their natural confusion on the European situation worse confounded.

It was 4.15 when I trailed out of the Metropole. New arrivals were still flocking into the room, the band still

blared, the crowd still laughed, quarrelled, danced, and chattered. I stotted along the Okhotny Ryad looking for the soft spots on the pavement. The National was ablaze with lights and the entrance-hall as busy as at any other hour. On the second floor a man, who looked like a retired colonel of the Imperial Guard, was enthroned in the blonde's chair. I said, "Number 45. Call me at eight o'clock, please," and he rose in his wrath.

"I have never heard of such a thing in my life. Ten o'clock is early enough."

Oh, well, what did it matter? "Can I have a bath, please? *Now*, not in a few minutes."

"It is impossible, Citizeness. Something has gone wrong with the water-supply. And in any case," he added more kindly, "you would not like the bathroom—it has mice."

I began to laugh. I out-Audreyed Little Audrey. The retired colonel joined in, and our combined giggles echoed along the vast corridor. Between laughs we gasped at each other how terribly funny it was to have no water and lots of mice in a bathroom. When we felt a shade saner we marched along to number 45 where he opened the door for me, shook me by the hand and said good night.

I fell asleep to dream of dancing the tango with Stalin on the sixth floor of the Foreign Office while Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, and Ordjonikidze¹ provided the music. . . .

III

Dirck was a little disgruntled. He said that we had arranged to see Moscow together, but that so far all I had done was to chase about with my Russian friends. I knew that the real trouble was he had fallen in love with his guide, Nadya, a sombre child who spent her days in taking foreigners to see the sights and her nights in studying for

¹ Ordjonikidze died of a heart attack in the early spring of 1937.

a degree in psychiatry; but I felt guilty. For one thing, I had certainly fallen down on an agreement; for another, I felt a little bothered about Nadya. She was, in common with most Russians, extraordinarily ignorant of the conduct of the love affair as practised by Europeans (amazing how quickly one alluded to all races west of the Soviet border as "Europeans"). And she might very easily suffer a severe mental hurt through the present exaltation and subsequent indifference of a cosmopolitan. It was not Dirck's fault: it was not Nadya's fault: it was simply that they gazed upon the same thing through different glasses.

"Suppose we have a whole day: we can see the shops in the morning and, after I have skipped my dinner in order to talk books in the Leontievsky per Street, I can meet you at the Museum of the Revolution?"

"And after that," said Dirck very firmly, "we will go to the Anti-Religious Museum. You lack education in these things: if you do not see the museums you cannot know the country."

"You mean, if you gauge your viewpoint by museums you show your appalling ignorance?"

We finished our breakfast in a sort of armed neutrality to which the Danish professors contributed. A week in Moscow had intensified their Tweedledum-Tweedledee complex. With the inner radiance born of unlimited caviare they descended upon us.

"You have been to the Park of Culture and Rest . . .?"

"We thought it rather overdone."

"But my friend suggested the Hermitage . . ."

"And we found it *full of better-class people*."

Although the time was eleven o'clock in the morning I called the waiter and demanded a vodka. I hated the stuff; but no other protest against such idiocy was available. The Danes faded out: any woman who ordered vodka in the middle of the morning was clearly beyond the pale. Swallowing pure turpentine I said to Dirck: "I'll traipse

Moscow for twenty-four hours on end, but I won't take those Danes."

"Don't be so silly: think of the sight-seeing tickets you are wasting."

A sudden and Scottish chord struck in my mind. Just think. . . . Since my arrival in Moscow I had accumulated about half a dozen green slips which I had not used. That seemed wrong. "All right," I said, "I'll scatter my coupons like so much seed on the good earth—and you get me out of it when it gets too fierce."

We began with a deplorable quarrel over cars at the hotel door. The Danes had to have a seat next the driver; and the Czech diplomat and his son, who still seemed to be with us despite the multitude of Embassies and Consulates which starred Moscow streets, said they must have a back seat to themselves. Poor Irina, the only guide to whom I could speak rationally, did her best to separate sheep from goats, and eventually we sped in the direction of the Convent of the Blessed Virgin. "It's one of the few sanctuaries in Moscow," I told Dirck irritably, "let's hope we're not making for it with this mob."

We were.

The Danes stared at the sweet, small building wherein Peter the Great had imprisoned his wife and son, and said they would like to take a photograph of the little gold canopy which shielded a tomb in the garden. To this end they set up tripods, and squinted through lenses, and generally made such a nuisance of themselves that I retired to sulk under a sycamore tree. Presently the young Czech joined me. "I hate this country," he said piteously.

"Why?"

"You are a woman of experience; I can see that, so I may tell you. There are no pretty ladies in the Soviet Union. Never before have I spent a holiday without pretty ladies. Even in Holland, where they have no chic, one may enjoy oneself. I prefer Paris, of course," he went on wistfully,

"the ladies of the Folies Bergères are so correct, so well-behaved. . . . But here the situation is impossible! These Soviet women are hopeless; their bodies are shapeless and their minds full of higher mathematics."

I shut my eyes and leaned against the sycamore trunk. "If you belonged to me," I said in English, "I'd spank you"; then I added in French, "The Soviet régime has its faults: encouraging prostitution is not one of them. In Moscow alone there are hundreds of women who formerly belonged to that profession. The State took care of them, trained them, gave them decent jobs. Now they are happy."

When I opened my eyes he had gone. He told Dirck afterwards that he had been sadly mistaken in me. Because I knew Russian and he had seen me dancing with "desperate characters" at the Metropole he had imagined that I could introduce him to gay life in Moscow. "But I see now," he added with dignity, "that she is a woman of no intelligence."

It was very peaceful in this corner of the garden. Irina came and sat down beside me. "Tell me," I said, "is there a law against grass-cutting in the Soviet Union? Your paths and flower-beds are beautifully weeded, yet you allow your grass to grow so untidily. It worries me."

"Yes, there is a law. You see, all our grass is needed for hay. We haven't yet got enough fodder for horses and cattle." She sighed a little; perhaps she was thinking of the many things of which her country had not yet quite enough, but more likely she was remembering those ghastly years when Russia starved. Always, with Irina, I was conscious of the shadow of those years. Tall, with red-gold hair which framed her thin, sensitive face, she was very lovely—but very tragic. Born and brought up near Archangel she had come to Moscow University with her brothers eight years earlier. Now she was quite alone, living in a little room near the market. She gave no explanation of her loneliness except the brief statement that all her people had died, and although we became great friends during my stay in Moscow

I could never penetrate the reserve in which she shrouded her personal affairs. She would chatter gaily about all kinds of things; then she would mention her parents or her brothers and the lids would droop over her blue eyes. Poor, dear Irina. She might have won forgetfulness of whatever horror clouded her mind had she been able to tell somebody the whole story; but she was too shy, too terrified of all emotion. All winter she studied at the University: all summer she trudged Moscow with tourists who asked her futile questions and demanded impossible attentions. She told me she liked her job; but I could never believe that brave declaration, because whenever she had to describe the sights to a crowd of people her excellent English degenerated into a lame stammer and her slim fingers twisted and untwisted ceaselessly. When Dirck or I took her to theatres or cinemas she was gay, amusing, enormously intelligent; but she was fashioned of too fine a clay for the business of interpreter.

We smoked in silence while the Danes hopped about with their cameras and the others wandered round the cloisters. The sun went in and black clouds rolled up the sky. In a few minutes the short but violent thunderstorm, which seemed to visit the city every day at noon, would break upon us. Irina sighed again: "I must ask the professors to hurry. Do you think they will be annoyed?"

"Better annoyed than drowned. And don't put on your sheepy look when you speak to them. This inferiority complex distresses me."

She smiled. "Stand beside me, then it won't be so bad. I wish you would come with me this afternoon: I have to take a large party of foreign authors to see a factory."

I groaned. By that time the sun would be shining gloriously again and the city, refreshed by the rain, would hold out enchanting arms. A factory! And a party of writers! I opened my mouth to say no, saw Irina's pathetic face and capitulated. "I'll come on condition that you

and Dirck and I go afterwards to see the new coloured film."

"If you will let me pay for my own seat."

Never had there been such a proud citizen as Irina. I knew her wages to a kopek; and that she simply could not afford the cinema too frequently. But the wretched woman would not even let you buy her a newspaper if she could avoid it. "We'll see about that," I replied, and decided to tell Dirck to get the seats in advance.

The Danes were cross; the Czech diplomat crosser. They didn't believe the thunderstorm legend; they still had several photographs to take; the normal time for this excursion was two hours; and they weren't going to be done out of a single minute. Irina blushed and stuttered while Dirck and I raged in the background. Finally we made a dash for the cars as the heavens opened. By the time the Danes had collected their tripods they looked as if they'd been ducked in the Moscow River.

Dirck rather liked the factory idea. "But it will be a special show place. And why do writers want to see a factory?"

"Don't ask me. Irina says we have to pick them up in a charabanc at the Novo-Moskovskaya Hotel. There are eighteen of them in some literary tour." My generous impulse was fading.

"And afterwards we can go to the museums."

"No, Irina looked so miserable I asked her to come to *Nightingale, Nightingale* with us."

"My God!" said Dirck. He liked Irina, although he thought her too much of an enigma, but what rankled was the fact I had not suggested taking Nadya as well. "I shall go straight down to the Bureau and find her."

Basely, I let him go without telling him that Nadya was escorting two Americans to the ballet. . . .

The eighteen writers were sitting stiffly in the charabanc when we panted up, ten minutes late. They were of

all shapes, sizes, and nationalities, and they all carried maps, note-books, guide-books, and pencils. I wedged myself between a stout Yorkshireman and a wizened Cockney who were most disappointed in the Soviets. They were very left-wing, very full of propaganda, very disgusted that their crusade in search of the pure, bright flame of Communism had proved abortive. "The whole country's reactionary," they grumbled. "The people are a lazy, dirty, good-for-nothing lot, and as for the Government . . ."

That was a little more than I could stand. I said I admired the Government tremendously because they had the courage to admit their mistakes. Having found some of their measures did not work they promptly changed them. What was more, they had evolved a completely new way of living and had taken a bare ten years over doing so.

"But it isn't Communism," they wailed.

"I'm not so sure. I think if Marx were alive he would disagree with you. But you can call it State Capitalism if you like—the name doesn't matter. The important thing is that they've got away with the biggest experiment the world has ever seen."

After that there was silence until we reached the factory.

In the next two hours I felt thoroughly ashamed of my profession. These eighteen men, with their red ties, their asinine questions, their jargon about the proletariat, their rudeness, their inquisitiveness, and their note-books, were going home to tell bewildered readers of books, magazines, papers, and pamphlets, the truth about Russia. Their tour allowed them fourteen days in the Union, divided between Leningrad and Moscow. They didn't know the language and they regarded Russians much as we regard tigers at the Zoo. They made no least attempt to understand Russian mentality, and their one idea was to helter-skelter round as many factories, museums, hospitals, rest-homes, and public buildings as they could manage, bullying the interpreter as they went. With the notes they made so copiously, and a

few picture-postcards of Tsarskoe Selo and the Kremlin, they would return triumphantly to their various countries.

No wonder Soviet Russia was the writer's mecca.

The Yorkshireman was impressed by the number of huge electrical machines being turned out, and he, the Cockney, and a Communist agitator from Kansas plunged into a discussion on the hours, rates of pay, output, and so forth in factories they knew at home. There seemed to be a deal of talk about unions, and one worker being as good as the next, and the necessity for strikes when piece-work was allowed, so I asked politely if they would like me to translate the lettering on the great red banners which festooned the shops. Yes, they would.

Translated literally the banners exhorted every worker to better his neighbour's output so that he might make many more roubles and win the gratitude of his union and his country. There was no room for drones—and the lazy man would be made to suffer severely. All workers could air their views in the daily newspaper which every enterprise in Russia runs, and if the foremen or the directors were unfair then the workers could demand an inquiry which might result in their dismissal.

The faces of my audience showed clearly that they believed I was making it all up—especially the bit about bettering the neighbour's output.

Hot and exhausted we trailed upstairs, inspected the rest-and dining-rooms and sat down in the director's room. He told us the story of the factory—lavishly embellished with the propaganda the Russian loves—and Irina translated. Out came the note-books and the eighteen wrote steadily, putting everything down willy-nilly until I wondered how they would ever sort it all out when they got home. They asked questions until my head reeled. They wanted to know multitudes of statistics, and poor Irina got so tied up that the figures jotted down bore no relation to those

given by the director. Finally, the latter most sensibly ended the affair by walking out of the room.

In the charabanc going home the Yorkshireman nudged me. "I didn't know you were one of *them*: I thought you were English." He pressed some coins into my palm. Dazedly I looked at them. He had tipped me fifty kopeks!

IV

The cinema was disappointing. I had heard such glowing accounts of *Nightingale, Nightingale* that I had looked forward to it immensely, but here was the universal Russian story which forms the base for every novel, play, and ballet in the Union. Nightingale's people worked under terrible conditions in a Tsarist china and glassware factory. The proprietor was a portly gentleman with a beard, a huge gold watch-chain, and a wife who wore Paris clothes and carried a Belgian griffon under her arm. These two spent all their waking hours in glittering ballrooms where they danced, made love, and drank quantities of champagne. Unfortunately, funds ran low, so the proprietor bribed his foxy-faced manager to set fire to the factory so that he could claim the insurance money. Since in those days the workers and their families lived on the premises, hundreds of men, women, and children were burned alive, including Nightingale's father. After a terrific close-up showing a woman weeping by her baby's grave, it was explained that Nightingale and her mother were destitute, but that the foxy manager had offered the former a job in the rebuilt factory. His aim was clearly seduction; but the producer of the film had not bothered to follow up that bit—all that interested him was the propaganda angle.

After an interval, during which the large audience flocked into the foyer and drank *limonade gaseuse* which smacked faintly of prussic acid, we were shown an older and sadder Nightingale cheering her co-workers by singing songs to

them. The conditions of the workers were yet more appalling, and the proprietor was still drinking champagne. Then Nightingale and her friends read some leaflets on revolution, chased and killed the foxy manager, and proceeded to break all the crockery and glass they could lay hands on. Soldiers sent post-haste to quell this rebellion were greeted with volleys of plates, soup-tureens, and tumblers, while a small party of workers blew up the railway, drove half a battalion into a river and performed so many astonishing feats that I can't remember them all. By some odd mischance Nightingale, who had promised to wave a red flag out of the window as a signal to reinforcements of workers, was left alone and wounded in the shoulder in the deserted factory. Amidst frenzied cheering from the audience she dragged herself upstairs, tore a sleeve soaked in blood from her arm, waved it valiantly and fainted as she did so.

During the long anti-climax of more propaganda I thought the film over coldly. Apart from the utterly ridiculous story the photography was rotten, the production worse. Yet, a few years earlier in London, I had seen amazingly good Soviet films. Why then, with their great new studios, their ample State funds and their carefully schooled actors, did they turn out this trash and laud it to the skies?

The lights went up and I turned to Irina. To my horror I saw she was weeping unashamedly. This woman of thirty, who spoke four languages, who had a very real appreciation of art and music, who was doing a course in advanced psychology at the University, was crying her eyes out over the woes of Nightingale!

I gave it up. Nobody except a Russian can ever understand a Russian.

V

V.O.K.S., alias the Society for the Promotion of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, was an institution for which I quickly developed much fondness. Housed in a mansion which had once belonged to a rich aristocrat, it had a large staff of alert and courteous men and women who took endless trouble over visitors. If I wanted to see over the State Publishing Offices, to go to the theatre or the ballet, to find out anything about the Union from growing avocada pears at Sochi to *de-kulaking* Turkestan, I went to V.O.K.S., who immediately produced permits, tickets, and masses of sound information. There was only one thing which prevented me going there even more frequently than I did and that was the fact that the Bolshaya Gruzinskaya Ulitsa was a good distance away and necessitated a tram-ride.

Later on I was to achieve the Russian tram-technique; but when I was in Moscow I was still timid.

On this particular Rest-Day morning, the tram was a shade worse than usual. It consisted of three cars joined on to each other and each packed solid with humanity. A few dozen extra people clung to the sides, perched on the windows, festooned themselves round the woman driver's cab. I gritted my teeth, won a precarious foothold on the rear step, and started to wriggle my way to the driver—for in Russia a passenger who does not mount the tram at the back and alight from it at the front is liable to be clapped into a House of Correction forthwith. By the time we stopped at my destination I was right in the middle of the second car with two people standing heavily on my feet and a tall man spitting sunflower seeds into my hair. The mob barged and shrieked and pushed and elbowed each other, and hacked at every available shin. An Amazon of a woman seized me round the waist, yelled "*Angleeski?*" into my ear and swept me forward. Some twenty minutes later I

crawled out of the driver's cab, black and blue all over, only to discover that I hadn't paid my fare and that the conductress (the only person privileged to sit in any tram-car) was shaking her fist at me through the window.

V.O.K.S. revived me with tea, pleasant conversation, and two tickets for the Pushkin ballet, *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. Then I began to tramp back to the Museum of the Revolution to meet Dirck.

Tram-riding was painful enough but for me, at least, it was not so dangerous as walking. Owing to my fatal habit of staring all round me, and to the pot-holes in the streets, I was continually plopping down on my knees, a devout attitude which caused intense amusement to passers-by and ruination to my stockings. Indeed, my supply of these ran out after the first ten days, and since twelve roubles fifty was the price demanded for thick cotton ones in the shops, I went about bare-legged.

My third fall this morning deposited me beside a very drunk man who had just staggered out of a public-house to measure his length on the pavement. For the extraordinary thing about the Slav is that he is never what we call "tight": he is either stone-cold sober or completely incapable. Picking myself up I walked on pondering this curious trait and wondering how a worker making a hundred odd roubles a month could afford to get drunk on vodka at sixty kopeks a glass.

Dirck eyed me sourly. "You've torn your frock, your shoes are filthy, your legs are all dusty—where *have* you been?"

I said meekly, "In a tram-car."

He informed me that I was deteriorating, allowing myself to become Russianized. We crawled up countless stairs to the first room in the museum in silence.

By some miracle it was the only museum in any country I have ever been able to pretend interest in. There was a more than life-size statue of Stalin in his greatcoat, field-boots, and peaked cap, that made you realize the man's colossal strength, both mental and physical. There were

amazingly fine photographic records of the War, the Revolution, the Civil War, the famine and of every workers' rebellion in every country of the world since 1917. (It was queer to study pictures and newspapers giving the complete dossier of the English General Strike in the middle of Moscow.) There were replicas of every type of weapon, from machine-guns to knuckle-dusters; there were beautifully made scale-models of warships; there was a waistcoat belonging to Lenin; there was a whole wall devoted to descriptions of Stalin's career. Only the pangs of hunger arrested my absorbed prowling: "What is the time?"

Dirck said, "Half-past three," and I bounded down the gallery. I had a lunch appointment at half-past two!

Nobody minded my lateness. I ate a huge meal and remembered to ask about the drink question.

"It is only on Rest Days that there is much drunkenness."

"Yes, but even then it must cost a lot."

"About one rouble eighty. It is quite simple. You buy a bottle of *piva* and a glass of vodka. You drink half the beer, swallow the vodka, then finish the beer."

I was incredulous. *Piva* was wishy-washy stuff, and what was a single glass of vodka to a Russian?

"Try it," smiled my hostess.

I did—and went down as though I'd been pole-axed. Three hours later I awakened with a violent headache and a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Tottering homewards I shuddered sympathetically as I passed several prostrate figures.

Dirck was waiting for me in the hall with the usual: "Where *have* you been?"

"Drunk."

The lift-man beamed, put his hand to his head and swayed to and fro.

Dirck looked horrified. "But it is half-past eight and you said you would come to the Park of Culture and Rest!"

"Oh, in an hour—two hours. Please leave me alone."

Once in my room I rang the bell firmly. Mice or no mice, I was going to have a bath.

At ten o'clock I descended, refreshed, and found Dirck in the dining-room. "I am starving," he announced dramatically.

Most strangely I too was hungry. That was part of Russia's magic. You could walk miles through her rough streets and not feel over-tired. You could have a brief five hours' sleep and awaken full of energy again. You could get drunk and feel hungry so soon as you regained sobriety.

VI

I wish that H. M. Bateman would go to Moscow and do a caricature entitled *The Woman Who Dropped a Cigarette-end in the Metro*.

The Moscow Metro is the most astonishing thing in the Soviet Union. It has thirteen stations, or rather palaces, built of Caucasian or Ural marble, or Ukrainian ice-stone. At each stopping-place there is an entrance and an exit, equally superb, equally enormous. You feel like a pygmy as you cross about half an acre of tessellated pavement or brilliant mosaic to the escalators. From high vaulted domes arc-lamps in real alabaster bowls shed myriads of lights which turn marble walls into shimmering curtains of gold or red, and ice-stone walls into deep blue veils. The escalators themselves are ten times wider, grander, more swiftly moving than any in London or on the Continent, and below them are tunnels—all pure white and brightly lit—which are ten times too big for the trains. So enthralled was I by sight of all this glory that I ignored the multitudes of notices which decorated waste-bins, so handsome that you failed to recognize them for what they were—and *dropped my cigarette end on to the platform*. Immediately policemen blew whistles, officials rushed up, at least five hundred members of the public groaned and pointed and wagged their heads. The

fact that I had ground the stub with my heel made matters worse. I was asked for my name, my papers, my identity-card, my address, my wage, and my occupation. In vain did I put on my half-witted expression, shake my head and murmur "*Angleeski*." While a woman sweeper removed the offending scrap of tobacco an official fetched a policeman who spoke English. "You are a foreigner," he said rapidly, "so we must be polite to you, but please understand in future we *will not* have our beautiful Metro defaced. Where are you going?"

"To the Park of Culture and Rest. I am sorry, Comrade. I did not mean to spoil your platform."

"Yes, yes. But at the park you must try the parachutes, and dance to the accordion. You know your way? . . . See, I will write down the name of the station. When you leave it turn to your right across the bridge."

My sins were forgotten. Officialdom was wreathed in smiles. The mercurial policeman was far more anxious that I should appreciate the park than that I should apologize for my crime. But Dirck and I were still a little agitated by all the excitement, so when a train roared in and the crowd surged towards it we followed them blindly.

"*Krimskaya Ploshchad*" was laboriously printed in English capitals on the policeman's scrap of paper.

"It is a terminus," I told Dirck. "We just sit there until we reach it."

We sat. At the Smolenskaya Ploshchad the carriage emptied and the train remained stationary. We said casually that perhaps there was a minor breakdown. Presently an official tapped on the window. "Terminus."

"But the Krimskaya Ploshchad?"

"On the other branch. You have taken the wrong train. Go back to the Biblioteka Lenina and change."

We went back; we changed trains; we arrived at the Arbatskaya Ploshchad. "On the other branch. Go back to the Biblioteka Lenina and change."

"And that," said Dirck fiercely, "is what comes of your nasty habits."

I said: "Well, they shouldn't have so many squares in Moscow, and anyway, I'm consumed with a desire to see the Lenin Library."

In the end we arrived at the Park of Culture and Rest shortly before midnight. Thirty kopeks each admitted us to paradise. True, the inevitable faces of Lenin and Stalin flapped on banners above our heads, appeared miraculously in fireworks, scowled at us from a flood-lit flower-bed, wherein they were fashioned from a selection of multi-coloured tufted plants; but apart from these reminders of Revolution the beauty of the long central avenue with its coloured fountains, its rough but splendid statues of athletes, its brilliant flower-borders made us blink. Once again, the Russians had excelled themselves over flood-lighting. In the place of honour, surrounded by great jets of iridescent water, was the ten-foot-high statue of a Soviet oarswoman, her thin shirt clinging to the lines of her body, her magnificent head thrown back, her long slender limbs gleaming under the fountain's spray.

We sat down on a bench and gazed at her, fascinated. Around us strolled courting couples—for whoever said romance was dead in the Soviet Union had not visited the Park of Culture and Rest. Somewhere far away a band played the ball-scene music from Tschaikowsky's *Eugene Onegin*. . . .

A long time afterwards Dirck stirred. "We'll have to go: if we don't we'll stay here for ever like people paralysed by beauty instead of by a Gorgon's head."

We moved away from the oarswoman, looking back over our shoulders at her loveliness. A little man rushed up, told us excitedly that a woman had planned and made this park, and rushed away again.

I wanted to meet that woman.

Walking down a path we were suddenly plunged into a

kind of super-Coney Island. A loud-speaker shouted that "*Everybody loves my Baby*," a fantastic wheel covered in fairy-lights revolved slowly, two men on a greasy pole stretched lengthwise between two struts tried to box each other, children dashed by on roller-skates, half Moscow applauded.

The wheel intrigued me. As it came to a standstill I wandered up and examined it. Inside it were a lot of small boxes in which one sat, surrounded by noisy Russians, while the wheel revolved. I had to try it: Dirck refused. Sandwiched between a Kuban Cossack and an enormous woman who told me confidentially she had suffered fifteen abortions—and wasn't the New Constitution wonderful?—I quaked in a darkness thick with the odour of sunflower seeds. The wheel began to turn. . . . I began to feel sick. . . . The Cossack began to yell. . . . The enormous woman began a lurid description of her three husbands and her fifteen operations. . . . After what seemed an eternity the wheel stopped.

Dirck said: "Come and have some ice-cream."

Something had died in me while I sat in the revolving wheel. Trotting alongside Dirck I tried to realize what it was—suddenly I knew. Middle-age.

Sitting in a flood-lit enclosure at a little table covered by a striped umbrella I babbled dreamily, "I'm not really thirty-eight, and I think I shall bring the children to Russia. They'd like it so much. Think how they would enjoy an open-air school all summer, and coming here at week-ends, and swimming in the Moscow River? Besides, they'd get an education in Moscow that couldn't be equalled in Europe."

Dirck was at his most elegant. "I cannot imagine your children in Russia. They would be dreadfully unhappy without party frocks, and cricket, and iced cakes for tea. *Just because you adore Russia—you are the most strangely enthusiastic woman I have ever met—you want to pitchfork

your family into the school on Pimenovsky per Street. . . . My God, there's the Croat!"

We forgot everything except the necessity of hiding under our umbrella. Was it my imagination, or were the Croat's knees a little thinner? She stood majestically at the entrance to the enclosure haranguing a waitress who understood nothing of what she said. Behind her was a tiny German in hiking-kit with a huge rucksack strapped on his shoulders. "The walking-tour," I breathed exultantly. "She's nobbled some one."

But she had spotted us. Abristle with indignation she marched towards the table. "Such friendship!" she said loudly. "I give the address of the Bureau in Berlin; I ask you to walk through the Ukraine; I *spread* myself in order to interest you in the most wonderful form of exercise—and you neglect me!"

"But, Madame, we do not walk."

"Bah, that is only an excuse. The real reason for your perfidy is that you are Communists, agitators, lawbreakers. . . ." She stopped for want of breath and I, most stupidly, giggled. The picture of Dirck as an agitator amused me a whole lot.

He did the only possible thing: he asked her to have an ice-cream. While we waited for it she and the German gave us their views on Soviet Russia. They thought the people were rude and unfriendly, the way they lived disgusting. They disliked the food, the hotels, the guides, the shops, the theatres. The German had paid seventeen roubles for a lemon and five for an apple. The Croat had spent most of her waking hours in the Intourist offices without being able to beat up a hiking party. Now they were going to set out, two against this strange new world, to walk to Gorki: they were going to loathe every minute of their journey, but having paid for hotel accommodation and food tickets for a month they were determined to get their money's worth.

They were bores, and their whining complaints were maddening; but they were infinitely pathetic. They were blind, deaf, and dumb, unable to appreciate the magic of Russia's sun, or the serenity of her moon-bright summer nights, or the eager kindness of her people. Presently they trailed away, still fulminating against the U.S.S.R., but slightly comforted by our gift of ice-cream.

We strolled down to the lazily curving river. In the centre of an open space where the earth was trodden hard, a man with an accordion sat on a little stool playing the swinging, pulsing tunes of peasant dances. Suddenly, from among the crowd who had gathered in a vast circle, sprang a leaping figure in white blouse, dark breeches, and high boots. The music quickened, the dancer twirled, bent, clicked his heels, spun madly on his toes. . . . Others joined him: an ancient in a tattered greatcoat, bare-headed girls in sleeveless frocks, Red Army officers and men, workers of all descriptions. Within a few minutes there must have been close on a thousand people dancing.

We moved on along the boulevard which followed the river-bank. In another open space about a hundred couples were learning folk-dances from an instructor who stood beside the band on a platform covered with a semicircular arch and bawled through a megaphone. The lesson was characteristically thorough. Absorbed in mastering the steps, the pupils submitted to doing them over and over again and did not seem in the least self-conscious when their teacher jumped from his perch and mimicked their mistakes.

A Tatar pulled me by the arm. "You will partner me?"

I felt glad I had left middle-age in the revolving wheel. For the next hour I cavorted joyously with the Tatar—I even did the step where you shoot your legs out alternately from a curtsy-sitting position, while a scandalized Dirck shook his head at me every time he caught my eye. When the band stopped and began to pack away their instruments I almost wept.

The dawn was breaking when we left the Metro at Okhotny Ryad, but instead of going straight to the National we wandered up to the Red Square and clutched each other as we saw the light creeping over the walls, gilding St. Basil's domes, turning Lenin's tomb into a shimmer of rose. "It isn't real," we said stupidly; "there can't be so much beauty in the world."

The huge square that had seen so much happiness and so much tragedy, that had held crowds for Tsarist festivals, May Day processions, Red Army reviews, Revolution anniversaries, and the funerals of Party leaders, was deserted save for the guards outside the mausoleum. For a brief space we had the heart of Russia to ourselves. Rather awed by that thought we sat down on the steps of the State Universal Store and stared at the Kremlin.

A guard came towards us across the square, the sound of his tread on the uneven paving loud and jerky in the empty air. "You must not sit there, Citizeness."

"We are doing no harm, Comrade. The square looks so lovely in the dawn."

He pulled at his collar and looked embarrassed. "I am sorry; but there is a law against sitting on steps."

I had met few laws of the kind in Moscow, so I respected this one. "We don't want to get the boy into trouble," I said to Dirck. "Let us walk across to the tomb and then go home."

The guard kept pace with us: ten yards short of the tomb he stopped. "No nearer, if you please, Citizeness."

Suddenly I realized what he meant. "Listen to me: if I were a foreigner who hated the Soviets and wanted to throw a bomb at Lenin I should do so between five and seven o'clock when you allow visitors to pass through his tomb ahead of your own peoples. I certainly shouldn't choose an hour when all is quiet and, therefore, every odd movement is suspect."

He grinned, accepted a cigarette and said: "I agree; but

my orders are strict. For myself"—his voice grew sombre—"I cannot believe that any enemy of the people would ever dare try to destroy Lenin or his tomb."

I felt rather doubtful about this statement. Knowing the stupendous effect the disintegration of that small, khaki-clad body would have on the biggest nation in the world I was vaguely astonished that no Trotskyist, no exiled Royalist, no Fascist, no Nazi, had attempted such destruction. Certainly the bomb-thrower would meet death as surely as Lenin had met it in 1924—but what was sacrifice of one's life in the glorious cause of upsetting the Soviets?

I said evasively: "I hope you are right. Anyway, you guard him very well."

We said good-day and turned towards our hotel. As we looked up at the Kremlin we saw the first rays of the sun glinting on the bayonets of soldiers posted in the spy-holes high on the walls.

Even as Moscow slept the steel from which Yosif Visarionovich had taken his name kept watch.

VII

The Czech diplomat and his amorous son had departed; the Danes had gone to Leningrad, protesting alternately against the difficulties of catching the sort of train you wanted when you wanted it. Very plainly they did not appreciate the work of Kaganovitch, that square and determined Jew who created passenger, military, and goods railway transport throughout the Union from a heap of twisted rails and a string of battered rolling-stock the mere sight of which would have defeated anybody else. That the passenger trains still ran late and carried twice their comfortable load of humanity was scarcely his fault. Indeed, the wonder was they ever ran at all.

And Dirck had gone to spend the remainder of his holiday in—of all places—Warsaw. He had forgotten the

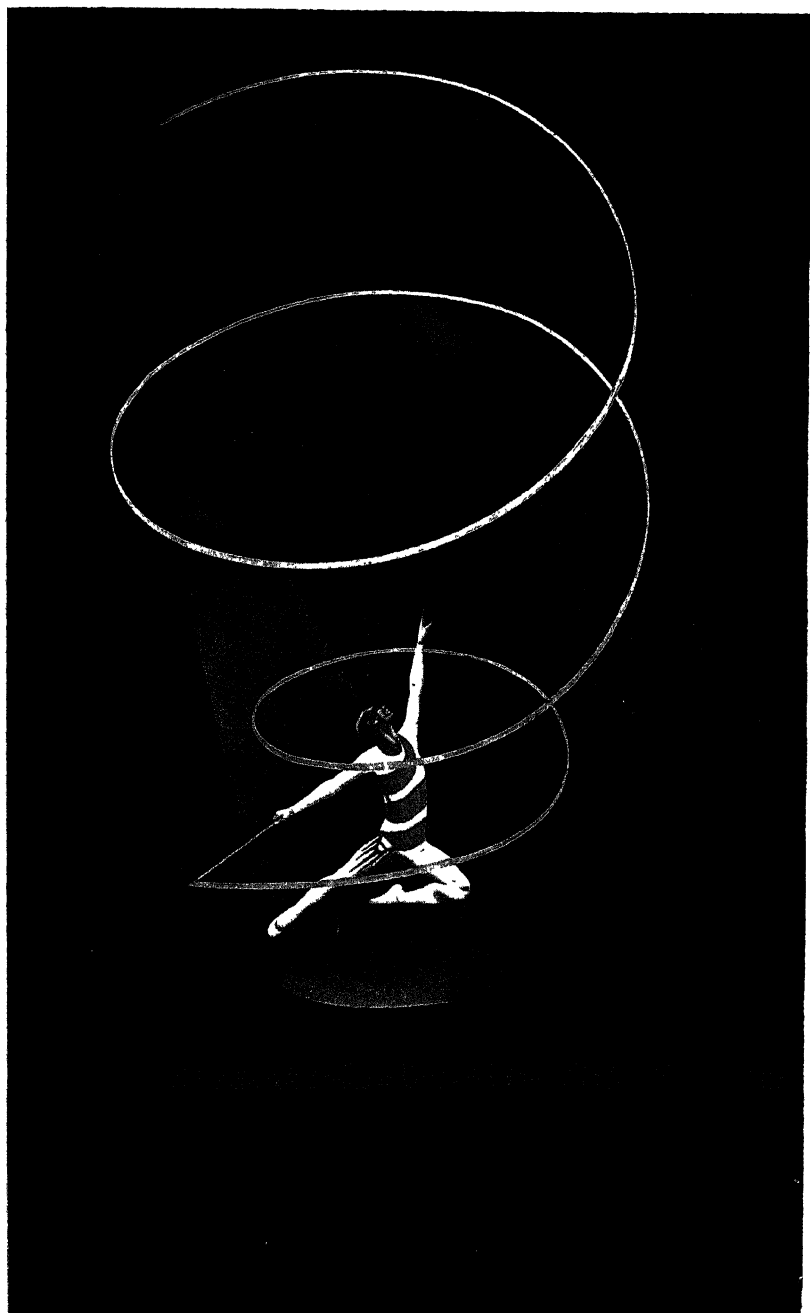
Ghetto and remembered the clop-clop of the horses' hooves, and the white sails that flecked the Weichsel, and the terrifying Englishness of the Place Napoleon. Irina and I came away from seeing him off at the White Russian-Baltic Station in gloomy mood. (Our sorrow at losing him was heightened by the fact that we had left Nadya indulging in a fit of hysterics on the platform.)

Plodding up the Ulitsa Gorkovo, which is Moscow's main street and is named after Gorki, I suddenly realized that I was alone in Russia. It was, thank goodness, only June, and as I was going south in a week's time it was unlikely I should meet the tourist traffic which descends on Leningrad, Moscow, and certain well-worn routes later in the summer. With no disrespect to the vanished Dirck I felt more cheerful. Stretching my arm to the north-west—after the manner of the lady in Chekov's play—I said, "*There is Finland.*" Irina stretched an arm to the east: "*There is China.*"

We smiled at each other in complete amity, and as we waited for the policeman's traffic signal at the Pushkinsaya Ploshchad I knew that I wasn't just going Russian: I had gone.

We said simultaneously: "Let's go into the fish-shop."

This was a place that revolted, yet fascinated. From its windows you could buy anything mentioned in *Chu-Chin-Chow* and several things that weren't. Dried fish abounded: eels, haddocks, sturgeon, white salmon, herring, a weird creature called *seryugya*, and an assortment of withered bodies I could not determine. But it didn't matter: apart from the herrings, which were very salt and very good, everything was tough, tasteless, and sour. Inside the shop, which was a large one, most of the space was taken up by tanks filled with a bewildering collection of live fish. Enthusiastic housewives pounced upon these, caught their fancy by the gills and presented it to the fishmonger, who wrapped it, still twitching, in an old *Pravda* or *Isvestia* and popped it



into the customer's basket. The smell was atrocious, but in a far corner one could buy a big pot of best Astrakhan caviare and a hunk of black bread for a rouble. Perched on a stool and digging at my caviare with a white-metal spoon, I knew a bliss enhanced by the knowledge that if I could transport all the caviare I had been given during the past few weeks to England I should die a millionairess.

It was a grand feeling to have in a Communist country.

With the grey pearls of the Volga a delectable memory we sauntered up the street, peering at shop-windows. Every second one displayed powders, scents, creams and unguents, together with eulogistic advertisements of hair-cutting, hair-waving, hair-dyeing, and shampooing. The former smelt vile; the latter twiddled the thick glossy hair of the Soviet women into monstrous curls, puffs, fringes, and ringlets—but then I yet retained the civilized and penetrating glare of western Europe. To young and feminine Russia these shops were the last word in sophistication.

An obscure form of *pasta* seen in the window of a big grocery store sent us diving through a doorway into a solid mass of shoppers who patiently awaited their turn at the counters. There was no question of "queueing up for scarce and expensive food"; the whole truth was that the proletariat, with their usual happy knack of procrastination, had put off buying their stores until an hour before the shops closed. They didn't mind waiting: it was rather fun, because one could hold lively conversation with one's friends, and indulge in heavy badinage with the assistants, and study the price-lists, and taste the goods.

The tasting business appealed to me. Egged on by Irina I nibbled sweets, broke off tiny pieces of biscuit, chewed stem ginger, raw *pasta*, sardines, and dried apricots. Then I drifted into the meat department and had an uproarious argument with a salesman over what he said was best Ukrainian ox and I said was a joint of bear from Elbrus. When the audience grew a trifle too excitable I moved on,

tugging Irina behind me. "For a punishment," she said severely as we regained the street, "you will come to the Anti-Religious Museum."

This was a joke dating from an afternoon when I had plodded bravely round that deplorably dull building only to fall asleep on a stone bench in its vault-like entrance while Irina and Dirck examined exhibits 50 to 100. Prepared for sinister statues, evidence of black magic, and signs of virulent propaganda against the Greek Church I had been sadly disappointed in a selection of chipped and deposed *ikons* and had refused flatly to progress farther. One had little opportunity to sleep in Moscow: the Anti-Religious Museum was, therefore, heaven-sent. Irina had been a trifle shocked by this capitalistic attitude; but she had got used to it by slow degrees and now regarded the idea as one of my major but amusing offences against the Soviet Union. She might weep for little Nightingale; but she could laugh at me—and therein lay her charm.

I said: "If you take me to that place again I shall secrete one of the bricks for which your streets are famous and smash your exhibits 1 to 50 to smithereens. If you're good I'll stand you an ice-cream; after that I'm going slumming on my own."

She looked wide-eyed. "But we have no slums."

We had the ice-cream all the same.

Irina said: "I feel so sorry about your news of Sir John Foster Fraser. When he was in Moscow he had a flat near the Pushkinsaya Ploshchad and I used to show him the city day by day. He was so kind, so nice, so *English*."

I wished that the outside news in Russian papers had told her of a great journalist's death; but then there was so little outside news in a country which had tightly closed borders, and only the few Irinas of the Soviets needed word of their foreign friends. For my part I was enjoying a rest from newspapers with headlines which warned me of sensational happenings all over the world, with columns of births,

marriages, and deaths, with pages of advertisements; but I was not at all sure that I would care for that rest to last too long.

Irina departed to take a party of tourists to the Opera and I began my search for Moscow slums. It was a search which went on intermittently for several days and covered many districts of the great sprawling city, but it did not reveal very distressful conditions. There was much overcrowding; but then the Russian really enjoys himself in small, hot rooms filled to overflowing with children, cook-stoves, mattresses, food, smells—and, curiously enough, flowers. Every window-sill carried a pot of petunias, or a bunch of wilting lilies. Even in the myriad tiny squares to which one penetrated through tunnels from the main streets there was no acute poverty. The children played, sang, and danced on the cobbles; their fathers rested on the narrow verandas which were hung with washing; their mothers invited me to come indoors and see their homes. They talked freely, telling me of the dreadful years when food was practically unobtainable and disease was rampant. Many of them showed the ravages of smallpox, typhus, skin diseases, severe gastric troubles: all were pathetically grateful to a Government who had presented them with a degree of comfort never before known. And under the programme for the New Constitution conditions were going to be even better. There were to be extra allowances for parents who had more than five children; there was to be more milk for babies; there were to be more clinics, crèches, summer camps, schools. And there were to be better houses. Already whole streets of derelict flat-roofed buildings had been torn down and huge blocks of apartments erected in their stead: in another three or four years this work would be completed. "Then we shall have electric light and real lavatories," one woman told me proudly.

They certainly needed the latter, for the sanitary conditions were primitive. But I recalled seeing worse in Spain,

Italy, and the Balkans, countries which counted their civilization in hundreds of years to this new Russia's ten. I also recalled the answer given me by a dour Scots doctor to whom I protested once in a Spanish town: "It's no' the things that smell that do the damage: it's the things that don't."

On the whole life was going forward in the back-alleys of Moscow. Black bread, cabbage soup, and tea is a nourishing diet, although it may appear a limited one to European stomachs; and when you have lived on dog, potato-peelings, and other unmentionable horrors for a long period it is pretty wonderful to have a good dinner each day—and the roubles with which to buy it. Clothes . . .? Well, so long as they covered you in summer and warmed you in winter what did they matter? Cheap cotton blouses and third-hand petticoats and trousers sufficed during the hot weather; when the cold came you wrapped your family in matted sheepskins and round fur caps, sewed the splits in the crackly skins together again each night, and congratulated yourself upon having such fine protection against the elements.

Boots were the great problem. Not all the leather manufacturers in Russia had yet been able to give decent footgear to the people. The Red Army took most of their output; the policemen the rest. Thanks to the superb quality of Russian leather, boots lasted for ever and a day, so within a short time the workers would be able to purchase proper shoes and boots. At the moment they shuffled about in an incredible assortment of sand-shoes with string soles, old bedroom slippers, and moccasins made of scraps of carpet.

Talking of shoes reminded me that the Moscow pot-holes had twisted the rubber heel off a white canvas one of my own. Sallying forth with that shoe I visited at least twenty of the cobblers' booths which lurked in every street. My explanation that all it required was the refixing of the heel with a rubber solution was greeted with extravagant pantomime by nineteen men. They had never heard of such a thing;

it could not be done; nobody wore shoes like that in Russia. The twentieth, a bright boy out for business, seized the heel, placed it in position against the shoes, drove three large nails through it—and charged me seven roubles fifty. After limping agonizedly for a hundred yards I struck another pot-hole which wrenched off both heel and nails. Back in the National I seized the scissors and sawed off the other heel, cursing myself for an idiot as I did so. It had taken me a whole morning and the sum of about five and sixpence to discover that rubber was the only commodity the Soviet Union did not grow,¹ and that the synthetic product was so expensive that to use it for shoes was an absurdity not to be considered.

Alas, I had reverted to type so much that I clung to those heelless shoes until I reached Warsaw on my return journey and found that both my big toes and one little one were sticking out of the canvas.

VIII

On a very hot June morning I found the saddest place in Moscow.

It took quite a lot of finding. The first person I asked for October Street was an aged woman who cocked her head on one side and said: "Let me see; what was it called *before* 1917?" The second was a Red Army officer from Vladivostok who clicked his heels and bowed: "Citizeness, I am a foreigner here like yourself." The third was a serious-minded young man in glasses who was anxious to air his English and informed me that I was wasting my time looking for hospitals and clinics. "The thing you want to see," he said pedantically, "is the Russian Boyar House, where the aristocracy used to interview their *illegible* children."

He fell into step beside me and began to talk earnestly

¹ Rubber is now being grown in Asiatic Russia, but as the trees take five years to bear it will be a long time before the Soviets wear rubber heels.

of his studies at the University. Unluckily, whoever had taught him English had told him to press his tongue against his teeth when trying to achieve the "th" sound, so difficult to users of the liquid Slav languages. As every sentence he uttered seemed to be prefaced by the words "I think" the result was disastrous since his tongue shot out alarmingly so soon as he had said the word.

It was a catching habit. By the time we reached the end of the street my own tongue was entirely out of control, and the passers-by turned to stare in amazement at two people of such rude habits.

Somehow I dismissed him and the Boyar House, and found the hospital and a delightful Armenian doctor who showed me all over it. This place served five districts in the city, and at least half the vast building was devoted to out-patients who came daily for treatments. While they waited (one waits for everything in Russia) they sat in long galleries, so cheerful and sunlit that the appalling condition of many of the patients struck one all the more forcibly.

"Venereal disease," said the doctor as we passed through the first gallery.

I had been over the Lock Hospital in London and through several Berlin and Vienna clinics; but I hope never again to see the things I saw that morning in Moscow. Brought up under loathsome conditions these men and women had reached a travesty of maturity during the early days of the Revolution. Dazzled by sudden freedom they had plunged into a life which recognized no law, no morality. Ignorant and illiterate they had known no better. Then came famine and confusion to sweep their land and leave them so ravaged by disease that they looked scarcely human. Worst of all, they still believed firmly that visits to the hospital would cure them.

"It is hopeless," said the doctor gently. "All we can do is to save them a little suffering and keep them from infecting others."

The next gallery belonged to the skin-disease department. Starvation, dirt, and an extreme climate had combined to make it a place of wretchedness.

Then we came to the radio-therapy wards and I felt a little better. My medical knowledge was slight, but I knew enough to realize that these doctors who sprang from a peasant stock, whose parents had been little higher than the animals a few years ago, had achieved miracles. Careful, thorough, intensely interested in their job, they had not only copied Europe and America but outstripped them in apparatus and technique.

We went back to sadness in the gallery for maternity cases. "We have abolished abortion, as you know," said the doctor. "Legalized abortion was abused to such an extent that the Government has had to alter the law. Now, unless a group of doctors decide that a woman is totally unfit to bear a child she must go through with it. She attends a clinic each week; she has three months' leave from her work, with pay, before the birth and a sufficient period for recovery after it. She then has the necessary free time in which to feed her child until it is ready to be weaned. Our trouble is that with a population of such enormous size it is impossible to make everybody understand that abortion is no longer allowed."

I thought of the woman in the revolving wheel—and agreed with him.

Beside me a girl of seventeen pleaded with a nurse. She was so young; she did not know where the man was now; she was terrified of having the baby; her father was furious with her.

The nurse reasoned with her; explained how she would be looked after and how happy she would be once she had her child; told her to bring her father to see the doctors.

"We shall find the man," said the doctor calmly. "Nobody escapes in Russia. When there is a question as to

fatherhood each man involved has to pay equal sums towards the upkeep of the child for three years. After that we do blood-tests."

"But the girl is so unhappy?"

His dark face was stern. "She is not a good citizen."

I looked round the gallery and wondered how many good citizens lived near October Street.

"Come along. Let us go and see the babies."

They were delicious. In warmed cubicles they were weighed, examined, tested for this and that, scrutinized for signs of any infectious disease.

"The Flowers of Life," said the doctor softly.

Within the next few weeks I was to realize that the whole of my odyssey crystallized into that phrase. But at the present moment I felt lugubrious. Not all the bouncing babies of Soviet Russia could take away memory of sick and broken men and women. I wished passionately that every agitator who prated revolutionary doctrines in English and American cities could come to this hospital and see the suffering through which true revolutionaries had to go. In this country, where unbelievable tyranny and oppression had been practised since the days of Ivan the Terrible, the purge of revolution had been necessary: in democracies where the workers enjoyed five- and ten-cent stores, cheap cars, high wages, radios, bicycles, telephones, delicatessen shops, and fashionable clothes at low prices it was ludicrous.

"Would you care," asked the doctor politely, "to come and see the electric massage department?"

He was so nice and I was most rude. He smiled at my refusal and walked with me to the door. "We are a queer race, very queer. But I do ask you to believe that the work we are doing here is good."

"I do believe it—absolutely. It is the need for such work that frightens me."

"You still think in terms of Europe although you use the Russian language. You forget our powers of endurance:

you also forget what a long way we have travelled in a short time."

As I crossed the courtyard a stream of people passed me. Some were blind, some were swathed in bandages, some were lame. Yet they marched confidently, full of assurance that they would meet with kindly treatment and genuine care. To them a hospital was in no way fearsome: it was a sanctuary in which they might lay their burdens and rest in order to gather strength for the morrow. Their faith was justified. Many of them would become strong again: others would at least know the absence of pain.

Feeling all sympathy for the Soviet medical authorities I turned up the street towards a little market, and something hurtled up the pavement beside me, gibbering for alms. Once it had been a man: now it was a legless, armless creature that manœuvred itself along by wriggling the pitiful trunk clothed incongruously in a ragged blue velvet jacket. Everybody threw kopeks into a little pail suspended from its neck: nobody paused. It was a beggar, an outcast, a thing unable to work. . . .

I put a rouble in the pail, and received a whisper in return. "I lost my limbs fighting the Germans in 1915: I wish they had killed me."

"Are you going to the hospital?"

A sneer twisted the bearded mouth. "They wouldn't let me in. Beggars and priests are the only people the State does not keep in Russia." With an astonishing wriggle it moved on.

I stood still in the sunshine and pondered over the strange mentality of the Soviets. Towards millions of people who were sick, hurt, and helpless they had developed a new kindness: towards a few who were so maimed that no way of living save begging was open to them they showed all the brutality that characterized the worst type of Tsarist overseer. It was stupid, as Montaigne said, to "amplifie and glose" such brutality. This was simply the other side

of the medal, the side which showed clearly that it takes more than ten years to eradicate an age-old indifference to suffering.

But two phrases of the Armenian doctor rang in my head. "*You forget our powers of endurance . . .*" "*Nobody escapes in Russia.*"

IX

The marriage bureau was a slip of a place between two skyscrapers. In one room, where there was a potted palm as concession to romance, a very efficient-looking woman sat behind a large desk and wrote mysterious things in ledgers: in a second room a girl with the sweetest smile I have ever seen attended to divorces (in place of the palm there was a carafe of stale water).

Into the first room tripped young boys and girls flourishing their identity cards. The efficient one noted all particulars in her ledgers, fired questions at each blushing couple, finally presented them with a certificate of marriage. Having heard so much of the Soviet disregard for holy matrimony I sat with my ears pricked for two solid hours and heard no breath of scandal. None of the couples had contracted previous marriages and the questions, which obviously belonged to the days when you could get a divorce paper and leave it on the dressing-table for your wife, or husband, didn't seem to me to fit the situation at all.

Efficiency said primly: "All previous marriages must now be entered on each card and both husband and wife must appear if they wish a divorce. Those who appear more than once before us are not considered good citizens."

I grew a trifle tired of watching square young bridegrooms twirling their caps and bashful brides flirting their eyelids, and went into the divorce room. Here, so the girl smiled, business was slack. We had smoked two cigarettes in peace before the door burst open and a swarthy Ukrainian appeared with a girl hanging on to either arm.

Girl number one had gone to Kiev to work in the shoe factory, had met, fallen in love with, and married the swarthy one. After six months of happiness he had been sent to Moscow and his bride had given him the address of her sister, whom he had never seen. First worried, then frantic over his continued silence, she had followed him to the capital to find him "married" to the sister!

Bigamy is a punishable offence in the Union; yet these three people came openly to the divorce bureau and asked what they should do about it. There was no evasion, no prevarication. The harassed youth scratched his head and shrugged his shoulders while his wives shouted each other down and jerked the poor man so viciously that I thought his arms might part company with his body at any moment. When they ceased at last, panting with their exertions, the youth announced in a surly voice that he didn't want to be married to either of them, a statement with which I had lots of sympathy.

The smiling girl behind the desk tried to look judicial. In the course of a very long and muddled speech she said that (a) all three were enemies of the people; that (b) the man must remain tied to his first wife; that (c) the second wife had a strong claim to possession of him; and that (d) she didn't know what the court of divorce inquiry would think of the matter—if they got to know about it.

By the end of this peroration the Ukrainian was holding hands with wife number one and grinning at wife number two. "Thank you so much, Citizeness, for your clear explanation," they chorused. "We go now: all is settled." Linking arms they marched out, faces abeam.

I said: "*What* is settled?"

The girl's smile shone out enchantingly. "Nothing. They will go away and drink *piva*, and tell their friends all their affairs, and in the end this marriage business will resolve itself as such things always do."

The ethics of the Soviet marriage system were a little beyond me. . . .

Outside in the street one man beat another's head against the wall while a small crowd betted languidly on the possible result of the massacre. A policeman strolled up, pulled assailant and victim upright by their collars, shook them violently and told them to go home. Just another little dispute which would resolve itself; but I was glad that Russian skulls were thick.

On my way home I paused by the mass of stones, mortar, and scaffolding from which was to rise, phoenix-wise, the gleaming white Palace of the Soviets. Once, there had been a gracious and lovely cathedral here. . . .

"The length of the palace will be nearly one third of a mile, its width will be two hundred and sixty yards, it will have five tiers piled above a colossal pillared hall and innumerable reception-halls, and on the topmost tier will stand a statue of Lenin which will be visible from a distance of thirty to forty miles."

The speaker was a large man with a shaven head whose voice lilted happily as he described the building which was to be a monument to the victorious struggle of the workers for socialism. "When the palace is finished," he added triumphantly, "it will be two stories higher than the Empire State Building in New York City."

Another man chimed in: "Yes, think of that! We shall have the tallest building in the world."

They were absolutely serious. They took no notice of the fact that while the Manhattan skyscrapers had been invented solely because the city had no space for extension, here in Moscow, capital of a country which spread over one sixth of the earth, there was no need to worry about space. Indeed, to anybody outside the Union, the idea of rearing enormous buildings seemed slightly ludicrous. But not so to the Russians: to them it was an absorbing game such as is played by very small boys when they build with

bricks and try to achieve higher towers than do their little friends.

One of the most interesting things about Soviet Russia is that, despite incredible advances in industry, in education, and in government, this eager, childlike mentality has not altered. It is responsible for the skyscrapers, the gorgeous Metro, the huge stadiums, the palatial new hotels; it is responsible for the Dneiprogos Dam, the White Sea-Baltic, Volga-Don, and Volga-Moscow canals, the gigantic works and factories which star the countryside; and it is responsible for yet more significant things—for example, the running wild of bureaucracy in various Government departments, and the seemingly extraordinary behaviour of the political prisoners in the Moscow trials of August 1936.

It is, in brief, the thing which sets the Russian beyond the understanding of other peoples; a naïve, attractive, infuriating, puzzling, fascinating thing which ought to be studied and analysed by every one who wants to know anything at all about the Soviets. Without it new Russia could never have made the strides she has done: with it she may yet defeat her high ambitions, for it is, paradoxically, both her strength and her weakness. Even with Russian connections, with endless conversations with all kinds and conditions of people, this mentality defeated me over and over again. I loved it one minute; pitied it the next; wanted to destroy it a third; loved it again a fourth. . . . Love predominated, for it was the very essence of Russia.

It formed the burden of my song when I paid a final visit to the man who had first asked me my views on Moscow.

"And have you seen the things we don't want you to see?"

"There's really only one thing you don't want people to see, and it is so elusive that you're safe ninety-nine times out of a hundred."

"And that is . . .?"

"The Russian mind."

Being Russian himself he did not understand; moreover,

he was a little annoyed. "The mental development of the people has been quite astonishing."

"I agree. But behind all that development you remain childlike."

He frowned at me. "Is that a fault? Is it something we should hide?"

"To me it is the most lovable quality you possess; but to the great majority of foreigners it is the thing which sets you apart *for always* from the rest of the world."

"We want to be apart: we are not interested in the rest of the world and their opinion of us does not matter."

"I realize that. All the rubbish that is talked in Europe about your machinations beyond your borders is untrue. Your one ambition is to make your huge country happy, prosperous, and self-supporting—the greatest country in the world. And you are, in my opinion, the greatest influence for peace in a troubled Europe. All your armies, your air force, your ships, your frontier fortifications are for defence—not for attack; and your plans for the next twenty years show plainly that your armament schemes have been created with the object of intimidating anybody who tries to stop you from getting on with your work. It is a splendid programme, but what is going to happen when you have carried it out? *The Party* won't worry about the outside world: *the population*—and if you keep up your present drive to increase the birth-rate it will be over two hundred million by then—will be interested; even now they clamour like children for news of other countries. Through every day of the next twenty years your closed borders are going to fret your millions of children a little more. . . . All right, you say, you will open your borders, stabilize international exchange for your rouble, let your children out into an environment which is so different to anything they have ever known that they will be bewildered first, then terrified, then unhappy."

"You talk nonsense. By the time we open our borders

the workers will be educated up to European and American standards."

"They're educated beyond them now, but mere book learning has nothing whatever to do with it. Stuffing them with knowledge isn't going to make any difference to their outlook. Can't you realize that when your children are confronted by all the comfort, the culture, the bustle of the modern world, they will stretch out their hands to seize such pretty toys?"

My companion drew himself up stiffly. "You forget our peoples are trained to strict Marxist beliefs."

I couldn't make him see that even if they were trained to any and every sort of mental gymnastics they would still remain Russian children, and we went on to talk of less controversial subjects: the beauty of the Kremlin seen from the far side of the river, the magnificent pageantry in Dzerzhinsky's *Quiet Flows the Don*, the brilliant acting of Elanskaya in Tolstoi's *Resurrection*.

But as I rose to go he said: "I did not agree with your speech about our future; but I admit this—you understand the Russian mind."

That remark pleased me more than anything else heard or seen in Russia.

X

On a hot June evening Irina and I walked down Petrovka and Karetny Ryad to the Hermitage where Gorki's *The Mother* was being played. As usual the streets were crowded, but there was a queer absence of the usual gaiety. People looked worried, little groups gathered on the pavement and whispered to each other, shopkeepers gloomed in their doorways, red flags with deep black borders were hoisted out of windows.

A man stopped us: he was weeping unashamedly. "Alexei Maximovich died this afternoon."

Irina and I looked at each other stupidly, unable to believe

his news. Gorki had been ill, we knew, with cardiac weakness following upon influenza, but despite his frailty and his age we had not imagined that he would die. Presently I stammered the first inanity that came into my head: "There will be no performance at the Hermitage."

Irina threw back her red-gold head: "*Of course* there will be!"

We walked on under a growing forest of mourning banners. The little baker's assistant of Nizhni-Novgorod, the boy who had once sailed with Chaliapin up the Volga to seek work in St. Petersburg—where the choirmaster of a cathedral chose him because of his sweet tenor and dismissed the world's greatest bass without hesitation, the repellent yet fascinating figure with the gnarled hands and the walrus moustache, the writer who stood with both feet firmly planted in Russian soil, the man who spent his long life in working for the betterment of the people, was dead. With his passing the last tenuous bond between old and new Russia snapped. . . .

The Hermitage was packed. The stage director made a long and impassioned speech; the audience clapped and wept; a girl on the balcony became hysterical and had to be forcibly restrained from throwing herself on to the stage; André Gide, thin-faced, bespectacled and sporting a red tie (which he has since discarded), received an ovation which moved him so much that he kissed all the actors and actresses on both cheeks. I wondered what Gorki would have thought of it all and hoped he would have been as interested as I in the woman seated in front of me.

Squarely built, as are most Soviet women, she was obviously deeply in love with her husband, who sat beside her. She was to have a baby very soon, and she was in great pain from a poisoned left hand which was heavily bandaged. During the interval, when we all wandered out into the gardens, her husband picked her a water-lily from the lake, and for the rest of the evening she sat with the flower cupped

in her right hand, her eyes alight with joy at its beauty. . . . Gorki, whose characters were always individuals and never types, would have loved her. Before me, on the stage, another and more tragic mother of his creation told me that.

We came out of the theatre to a city plunged into mourning. Outside the Hall of Columns Red soldiers were hanging flags and laurel wreaths: inside it men were placing a bier in position: down the Okhotny Ryad came streams of people bearing flowers.

The Metropole was crowded—but there was little dancing. At every table men and women sat quietly; even the Mongol policeman was subdued. "It is," he told me softly, "as if your Wells had died."

I wriggled uncomfortably. Would any literary giant, however great his prowess, receive from London the homage which Moscow accorded Gorki?

In our party people talked in low voices: "He covered an epoch in Russian history . . ." "Even in 1901 when he lived in the Crimea with his wife and two children he had tuberculosis . . ." ". . . and Tolstoi said he was the first to write about the vagabonds, the oppressed classes . . ." "Gorki is more than a name; it is a new word signifying freedom from spiritual and social slavery. . . ."

At four o'clock in the morning I walked along an Okhotny Ryad still busy with preparations for a great man's lying-in-state. A Red Army officer said: "If you go up to the Red Square you will see the troops going to fetch him home," so for the second time I visited the heart of Russia while the dawn was breaking . . . and now it was an eerie, green-lit dawn, thanks to the solar eclipse due to reach its zenith in an hour or two's time. The great gates of the Kremlin swung wide and the gun-carriage with its cavalry escort swept out and down the square. The faces of the soldiers showed livid in the queer light; the horses champed and neighed; the rose red of the Kremlin walls faded to a golden brown.

I blinked: this was surely the ride of the Valkyrie.

The eclipse was over and the sun was high when they brought Gorki home from the little village near Moscow where he had died—and where, oddly enough, Lenin also had breathed his last in 1924—to a capital draped in red and black. Every shop-window bore a laurel-wreathed photograph, every house had mourning flags, the streets within a half-mile radius of the Hall of Columns were closed to traffic so that the vast crowds who had come to pay homage to their dead teacher might keep their long vigil in peace.

Early in the afternoon I went into the hall itself. The scent of flowers was almost unendurable, for these filled the vast room. The scarlet bier was banked with wreaths, and against the red and black draped walls were heaped the tributes brought to a great man by the people for whom he had done so much. Great sheaves of Madonna lilies lay next sad little bunches of wild flowers; a huge cushion of multi-coloured roses supported several bruised gardenias, each of which had some message of farewell tied to its stem . . . and still the queue moved slowly through the hall, laying poppies, magnolias, lupins, petunias, field-daisies, even bunches of feathery grasses by the walls before filing round the bier.

Death had come quietly to Alexei Maximovich. The rugged contours of the face had smoothed themselves out and he looked peaceful, as though he had died happily, knowing that his work was done, that the battle he had waged through long years of oppression, persecution, and exile had been won.

A surgeon spoke to me: "Before he is cremated to-night we are going to remove his skull and take a death-mask of his brain, his wonderful, unique brain! I will show it to you before you leave Moscow."

There was something ghoulish about this earnest statement, something which made me feel a little sick. Probably examination of the death-mask would teach the Soviet brain specialists quite a lot; but the idea reminded me

horribly of boys playing a game of Indians going scalping. Beside me the surgeon went on: "It is impossible to get you a permit for the cremation; but to-morrow morning I will meet you at the crematorium and show you round. A most interesting sight, the manner in which the body lifts itself in the heat."

I fled out to the sunlit street and took great gulps of clean, sweet air. Once again the Russian mentality had defeated me.

Two days later I stood again in the Hall of Columns. The bier had been replaced by a square pedestal with four pillars, and upon this rested an urn bearing a tiny embossed image of Gorki. The guard of honour was changing, the Stakhanovites of Moscow giving place to members of the Central Committee of the Party, Alexei Tolstoi, Demyan Bedny, and other friends of the dead man. The flowers were now so numerous that only a narrow lane round the pedestal remained free, and along this filed thousands of workers. An old man, his eyes tear-dimmed, dragged himself past on crutches, a grandmother from Stalingrad, thrown back by her emotion to the days of youth, gabbled Greek Church prayers as she blinked at the urn, young Pioneers, their round faces awed, marched solemnly to their places behind the guards.

Presently the doors were closed, and for an hour there was silence in the hall while members of the Government, and the relatives and close friends of Gorki stood with bowed heads. Then from the street sounded the muffled beat of the drums and the opening bars of Chopin's Funeral March, and through a small door at the back of the hall came Stalin, Molotov, Ordjonikidze, Kaganovich, Chubar, Mikoyan, Andreyev, and other leaders of the Government. Moving heavily, his face twitching with sorrow, Stalin walked to the front of the urn, and watching him I felt strangely overcome by the knowledge that this man of steel could weep. As the others took up their positions on either side of the pedestal the music from without swelled to a

mighty cadence, faded again to the throb of the drums. Stalin made a slight signal with his head and the music of the *International* burst forth. With the ease of men brought up to manual labour the rulers of Russia swung the great pedestal shoulder-high and marched slowly out of the hall to join the head of the huge procession which awaited them.

Sight of that procession was unforgettable. The wild strains of the *International*; the enormous sobbing crowds; the walls of the Museum of History, of St. Basil, of the Kremlin shining in the afternoon sun; Stalin with his tear-stained face, his bushy hair tossed back from his broad forehead, one brown fist swinging by his side, the other gripping the pole supporting the pedestal; the wreaths carried high on staves by thousands of mourners; the people in white blouses who turned the Red Square into a sea surrounded by rose-red cliffs.

Before Lenin's tomb the procession halted. Leaving the urn on the marble steps the pall-bearers mounted the tomb and faced the throng. Bulganin, Chairman of the Moscow Soviets, Molotov, Alexei Tolstoi, made fine speeches about Gorki, speeches which held a passionate sincerity and a very real grief. André Gide, immaculate in a navy suit and still wearing his red tie, spoke of his friendship with Alexei Maximovich and his hurried journey from Paris to see him before he died; but as his speech was in French and as Koltsov, who translated it, was in a tremendous hurry to get the job over, I was conscious of anti-climax. . . . But the drums beat, and the music rose once more, and the pall-bearers carried the pedestal to the niche which had been made for the urn in the Kremlin wall.

The "Stormy Petrel" had gone to his last resting-place, and as I waited for the crowds to move on I thought of his song of that name:

" . . . You have died! But in the song of the bold and strong in spirit, you will always live as an example, as a proud call to liberty and to light!"

XI

It was my last morning in Moscow. I wanted to go south, to see the Dneiper, the Don, the Crimea, the Caucasus, the Black Sea with its tranquil beauty which could change so quickly into frowning hatred; but I was loath to leave a city I had learnt to love in all its moods. From my window I saw the old women sweeping vigorously below the Kremlin walls, the faint shimmer of the river, the gleam of St. Basil's Dome, the majesty of the great Museum of History, the colossal hall built for Tsarist festivals and now used as—of all things—a garage, the Chinese lanterns at the corner of Ulitsa Gorkovo, the busy crowds with their chatter and laughter, the superb façade of the Moscow Hotel—built for the convenience of commissars, engineers, and other affluent citizens and charging the equivalent of eight pounds sterling per day for a suite.

Queer, complex city of a thousand contradictions: how could I bear to leave it, to say good-bye to skyscrapers and sprawling houses, to the Mongol policeman and the Armenian doctor, to V.O.K.S., and the officials who had helped me, and the many friends who had given me hospitality? What would I do without my nightly visit to the Red Square, and the excitement of the Metro, and the flood-lit loveliness of the Park of Culture and Rest? Where, in Russia, would I find such kindness, such interest, such happiness?

For Moscow was happy; I had no doubts on that score. The standard of living was low; but for that reason the people were simple, open-hearted, sympathetic. They still had to struggle for many things which other nations had come to regard as necessities; but beneath their dogged determination to win these things was hidden a deep serenity of mind which was the very soul of happiness.

"One must work to live," they said; and as I remembered those words I knew that already my search was ended.

CHAPTER III
THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS

I

THE train for Kharkov was crammed. People ran up and down the platform seeking seats, an old woman shook her fist at the conductor and assured him in picturesque language that if she didn't get a place he and his family would be cursed for generations to come, two huge men with beards had a free fight, the usual crowd sat placidly on their baggage and said cheerfully: "There will be another train in a few minutes . . . to-morrow, next week, next century."

Saying good-bye to a sorrowful Irina upset me so much that I climbed aboard in melancholy mood and found my seat in a compartment already occupied by a harassed young woman with a crying baby, a dark Ukrainian who was eating gherkin, and a small girl who needed a good scrub. The train steamed out to frantic protestations from mother and child, tears from Irina, and an incredible display of heroics from the child who wanted a bath; the temperature was in the eighties; the variety of smells overwhelming. . . . I gave way to self-pity and felt absolutely certain I should never survive the fifteen-hour journey, which would probably, awful thought, extend itself into one of thirty hours. When the child was sick and the young woman asked me to hold the baby while she prepared his bottle I descended into an abyss of misery. Why, why, why had I left Moscow?

The mother beamed and held out her arms for the baby. Suddenly I was ashamed of myself. She was so young, and had just said good-bye to her husband, and the baby, provided he was fed and could get relief from the sticky heat, was a pleasant scrap. The sick child was no better and

no worse than my own on occasion. I looked up and met the Ukrainian's glance: "The Flowers of Life, he said.

We smiled, sat with our feet tucked under us while the attendant cleaned the compartment with buckets of water and a straw broom, and thereafter ate gherkin in amity. The little girl had some too and cheered up in remarkable fashion. She was travelling alone on a visit to relations and rather awed me by doing geometry in a note-book. When I asked her if she would not rather look at an illustrated book about the animals in the Ukrainian Game Preserve she shook her head and replied: "No, thank you. I must study if I want to become a good citizen."

The Ukrainian was an engineer bound for a big conference at Kharkov. Tall, burly, good-looking, he wore a well-cut dark suit and was clearly a person of importance. Before the War he had studied in Heidelberg and Munich, and he spoke English and German perfectly. "And I have many friends in your Vickers' company," he said.

I felt uncomfortable, remembering the Vickers trials, but he went on to speak affectionately of English engineers with whom he had worked and from whom, he told me, he had learnt a very great deal. "And also from the Americans who taught us how to build the Lenin Hydro-Electric Station and the Dneiprogos Dam. They were fine fellows."

"There are not many foreign engineers in the Union now, are there?"

He flashed white teeth in a grin. "No, we learnt all we could from them, paid them well, and sent them home—some of them to unemployment in their own countries, poor men. I miss them, for they brought me ideas and news and books—especially books."

"I like the honest way in which you all admit that you picked foreign brains, and then dismissed them when you were able to stand on your own."

"It is true."

"Oh, yes. And other nations do so also. But they don't

admit it. Can you see a Nazi telling a foreigner what you have just told me?"

He scowled. "They have forgotten how to tell the truth, thanks to the mad dogs they have as rulers. I loved Munich so much, thought her the dearest city in the world; I should hate to go back there now. But that is how Fascism destroys a kindly people, eats into their minds, makes them insincere creatures who hide an enormous desire for war underneath a flood of speeches which mean nothing. Do you not know that Germany is the greatest menace to our peace during the next few years, greater even than China or Japan? Can't you see how they look longingly at the broad rich lands of the Ukraine with their superb mechanization of agriculture? Don't you realize why they make shifty treaties with Poland? Europe says: "Hitler is not ready." Bah, they make me sick! Why should world peace wait upon the word of a renegade chair-bottomer from Braunau?"

I thought of the strip-farming of Germany and Poland; then of the vast sweeps of grain in the Soviet Union. Remembering the rather hungry folk in both these first-named countries I did not wonder that they envied Russia her lands, her great black-earthed steppes, her tremendous advance in industries of all kinds. "But invasion would be a tricky business. To begin with, your railway lines have a gauge six inches wider than European railways, so German or Polish rolling-stock would be of no use: to end with you have the Red Army, a very different army to the Tsarist one of 1914."

"The different gauge does not count. Wrangel proved that. The alteration did not take long. Assuredly the Red Army would defeat whatever troops were sent against it, but the most important factor against even a small invasion is the absence of roads."

I hadn't thought of that. The oblique Russian replies I had received in answer to my queries as to why there were so few highways had satisfied me. They were so busy with

more important things. . . . Soon they would build motor highways all over the Union. . . . Besides, look at the magnificent boulevard which was to run from Moscow to Leningrad? (At the moment it extended a brief twenty miles.) But now I saw the strategy of the thing. An invading army in this vast country wouldn't find it much fun advancing over chest-high wheat in the summer, or over frozen, snow-bound steppes in the winter while their sappers wrestled with the problem of the railway gauge. And above them—well, I had seen an air display in Moscow which made me gasp. The Soviet air force was probably the finest in the world, for the people were real "bird men." . . .

My warlike thoughts vanished as the train stopped and the little girl, the woman and the baby, all departed, screaming good wishes over their shoulders. "When we reach Tula," said the engineer, "I will buy you some Tula candy. Oh, and I must show you Tolstoi's farm."

A boy of about eighteen staggered into the compartment, laden with two heavy sacks, while behind him came two companions with more sacks. These they deposited on the upper berths while their friend arranged his in the corridor. "I am the only one travelling," he informed us, "and I go to Tula."

We offered him cigarettes, gherkin, and Narzan (a very prickly mineral water from Kislovodsk). He bounced delightedly on the seat when the engineer told him I was foreign. "English, yes, no? Good, I speak! I do, thou doest, he does . . ."

I interrupted hurriedly that I had a little Russian.

I might as well have spoken to thin air. That boy was determined to conjugate the verb "to do." On we went, with the evening sun beating in upon us, with the engineer grinning, with me perspiring. . . . "I did, thou didst, he did, we did, you did, they did . . ."

Dear heaven, how far away was Tula?

The sun had set before we reached it, and by that time we were struggling with past and present participles. I felt a colossal sympathy for all teachers of foreign languages, and the boy had a note-book full of heiroglyphics he would never be able to decipher. "I wish," he said wistfully, "we had time for the verb 'to go.'"

We pushed him out somehow, opened the double windows, seized his sacks and swung them on to the platform. They were so heavy and clanked so ominously that I asked the engineer if they contained bombs, but heard, to my relief, that their contents were only bits of machinery the youth was taking to the factory where he worked.

I sank back exhausted: the engineer went in search of Tula candy, large sticky cakes of mixed fruit-paste clamped between two covers of tough dough crusted with sugar. Spreading these on the table he said: "I have a favour to ask: will you lend me your soap, it smells so beautiful?"

I gave him a fresh cake as a gift, and he trotted along to wash in high feather. By the time he came back I had opened the large parcel given me at the National and put the contents beside the Tula candy. Fetching two glasses of tea from the attendant I surveyed the meal: four hunks of black bread, a slab of pale butter, a pot of caviare, two wings of tired chicken, a piece of tasteless cheese, a bottle of Narzan, and four shrivelled peaches. We left the windows open, defying the dust which swirls up from every Russian railroad, and settled down to our supper.

It was good. I thanked heaven fasting for my beer-opener and penknife.

Our talk was better. The engineer was one of the most interesting men I had ever met. He had read Dickens, Thackeray, Smollett, Fielding, Shakespeare. He could quote passages from Shelley, Keats, Byron, and Swinburne. Among the moderns he liked Wells, Shaw, Kipling, and Priestley. And his was no parrot knowledge, for try as I might to catch him out I could not do so. He knew more

of English literature and European art than most, and how he kept himself abreast of new developments was a miracle.

Always I was being humbled by these Russians. A publishing firm in Moscow had an illustrated edition of the *Jungle Book* which put any English edition in the shade; a railway worker could tell me more than I ever knew about our nineteenth-century authors; a Stakhanovite could defeat me by declaiming the speeches of Socrates in the original Greek; now this engineer could make me blush and stammer with his questions on subjects about which I ought to know much more than he did.

"But Europe is not for me," he said. "Some day I may see her again—do you remember the Apollo from the west pediment at Olympia?—but for the present I must work hard in my own country."

"Were you in the War?" So few of the Russians one met had fought with the Tsarist armies.

"I was wounded in '16. In the February Revolution I served as an officer under Kerensky's régime. I was in Leningrad then, and sometimes I used to go into Tsarskoe Selo, into Alexandrina's boudoir, and gaze at the portrait of Marie Antoinette which hung above her desk. A French President had given it to her in a present, and I often wondered if she ever glanced up from her writing and saw her own doom mirrored in Marie's lovely eyes."

"Poor Alexandrina!"

"Not altogether. Poor Nikolai, if you wish, but Alexandrina was a clever, crafty woman in the early days. It was only when she met Rasputin and came under his influence that she developed strange madness. You, who were not in Russia at the time, can have no conception of Rasputin's power. One little thing will show you what I mean. In Tsarskoe Selo there is a dirty, torn postcard which you may have seen. It is addressed to the Minister of the Interior and it concerns a foreign lady about whose

credentials there had been grave doubts. The writing is a mere scrawl, the spelling atrocious. The message runs:

“Give Mme — every honour and courtesy, because to me she appears a most elegant woman.—Gregorei.”

“. . . And that was the so-called priest who was to cure the Tsarevich of haemophilia!”

I felt unhappy. I remembered too many things: the plight of elderly relatives who had escaped to England, after indescribable hardships, to lick stamps in offices or to watch their children of ruined physique dying before their eyes; the expression on the face of a woman who had seen her husband thrown to his death from the balcony of a house on the Nevski Prospect; the tragic story of the daughter of a Moscow doctor who had seen her parents killed and who had herself disappeared entirely, despite the frantic efforts of her fiancé to find her. . . . I looked up and caught the sombre gaze of the engineer, and immediately remembered other things: the grinding years of oppression he and his kind had suffered; the appalling conditions under which they had been forced to live; the orgies of the *barins* and the poverty of the peasants who received a sack of grain and a gold rouble as reward for a season's service; the cruelties practised by the Tsarist police; the wild drive of the Cossacks down a Petersburg street. . . .

From far away the engineer spoke: “Did you ever read the reports of Prince Kropotkin?”

“I know. There was Andrei Gavrilovich Surkov. *‘He refused to enter a dark room, so the police began to beat him with the butt-ends of their rifles, on the head, in the stomach, everywhere. Finally he grew wild and seized the nose of the secret agent, Orloff, between his teeth. Only then did they stop. It was then ten o'clock, and at midnight he had been sent to the lunatic asylum, and as far as I know he is quite mad now.’* I am perfectly aware that that was only one of the many horrors Kropotkin saw. But was it necessary to repay

cruelty with cruelty, brutality with brutality? Above all, was it necessary to stage the tragedy of Ekaterinburg?"

The engineer leaned forward, his face eager. "Believe me, Nikolai and his family never died by order of the Government.¹ At that time, as you know, there was fierce fighting between Whites and Reds. The command was sent from Moscow that the Royal family were to be given safe conduct from Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg) to the Polish frontier, but Kolchak, the White Commandant, blew up a bridge on the route the messenger had to travel and the Reds, tired of waiting for instructions and afraid of what would happen if they kept their prisoners any longer, ordered them to be shot."

"How do you know that?"

He looked straight at me. "Because I was one of the men who shot them."

There was a sudden chill in the evening air. Over the remains of our absurd supper we stared at each other in the gathering dusk. I had always imagined the Bolshevik guards at Ekaterinburg as savage, drunken animals in whom the lust for killing ran high; yet here was this intellectual who remembered the Apollo at Olympia, who collected the works of Dickens, who spoke so proudly of his wife and child in Moscow, who earned 3,000 roubles a month and was a leading engineer, informing me in a perfectly ordinary voice that he had shot the Tsar. The thing was fantastic.

"Perhaps," said the engineer courteously, "you would like these Lenin stamps for your children?"

I opened and shut my mouth like a codfish. No words came.

He regarded me anxiously. "You do not feel well?"

I managed to murmur something about the draught from the window, and accepted the stamps. Clearly he was indifferent to my reactions to his revelation. In his mind

¹ Many other Russians I met disputed this statement, but as my object is to give actual conversations wherever possible, I leave the engineer's words exactly as he spoke them.

Ekaterinburg had retreated to its proper place, eighteen years back in the events of life. Gravely he began to discuss Scandinavian art.

About midnight the attendant came round to make up our beds and to bring us a final glass of tea. When we had sipped it the engineer asked if I would lend him a biography of John Knox which I had with me. "A good revolutionary, that one," he said simply. Then he kissed my hand (a non-proletarian courtesy still widely practised in Soviet Russia), "I will wait in the corridor while you undress. Slide the door open when you are ready. Good night and sleep well."

Sleep! I felt it would never come to me again. As I lay in my bunk in the hot, throbbing darkness, visions of that scene of eighteen years ago rose before my closed and aching eyes. My mind was confused, bewildered; it swayed between the agonies endured by Nikolai and his family, and the tortures undergone by the people under Tsardom. . . . Behind me sounded the rustle of pages being turned. The man who had shot the Tsar was reading about John Knox.

I awakened to bright sunshine and sight of a naked apparition standing beside my bunk. "Your tea," said the engineer.

He was completely unembarrassed over his lack of clothing, and began to dress between mouthfuls of tea. Thoughts chased through my sleepy head. That conversation of last night hadn't been true, of course; it had been a nightmare induced by heat and Tula candy, and this polite creature who now wore trousers and a singlet had neither killed the Tsar nor appeared naked a few minutes ago. But as the scalding tea roused me I knew that these hazy and hopeful dreams were false; that the man who was describing the poems of Pushkin as he tied his tie was no product of nightmare.

"It is eight o'clock," he announced cheerfully. "In another hour we shall be in Kharkov."

When he had gone to shave I dressed. Presently we sat by

the window and looked out on the fertile Ukrainian steppes. Orchards of cherry, plum, pear and apple stretched for miles, huge groves of young citrons followed them, occasional villages rose, like colonies of mushrooms, gave way to more orchards, fields of sunflowers, green and gold carpets of grain. Along roads that were the merest dirt-tracks sleepy brown oxen plodded slowly, dragging high, old-fashioned wagons behind them, and in tiny, flower-fringed pools women washed clothes and children paddled. An enormous tractor clanked its way to the horizon, multitudes of yellow dogs barked, pigs rooted in the lush grass, peasants passed busily between the sunflower rows. A lovely, peaceful countryside which spread itself beneath a wide blue sky and seemed without flaw until one noticed heaps of derelict hurdles, splintered, rotted, thrown down anywhere.

"Those are the barricades from the Civil War," said the engineer. "You see the fruit orchards; they are all new. Twelve years ago the Ukraine was desolate—no crops, no fruit, no anything. Then came the famine, and for years after that the people planted and planted, but got nothing in return. They could not understand the new ways of working under the Five Year Plan, the collectivization of farms, the object of the Government in altering the very basis of life. From here to Mineralny Vody in the Caucasus they rebelled, urged on by the Cossacks who were *kulaks* with grants of rich land gifted to them by the Tsars. Runners slipped from village to village exhorting the people to destroy their live stock and to leave the harvest rotting in the fields. The Revolution and the Civil War had already depleted stocks of cattle and so forth; the people killed the bulk of the remainder blindly and through sheer fear of collectivization. Cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, hens—even their horses, and a Caucasian would rather kill his wife than his horse. Then they sat back in triumph and, as you say, pulled a long nose at Stalin. They under-estimated his strength. He sent inspectors to seize every pood of grain

the peasants had stored to feed themselves with throughout the winter and left them to starve once more."

War, famine, revolution—the echoes of these things were everywhere in Russia, even in this smiling land of the Ukraine.

"After that the peasants learned their lesson. Now they are happy, prosperous, contented, and they admit the wisdom of Stalin's agricultural plan."

"Yes, but the cost, the terrific loss of human as well as animal life?"

The engineer made a gesture with his hands. "If you are poisoned you need a violent emetic. If the poison has already weakened you the emetic kills you, and it is as well that you should die because weaklings are of no use in life. The millions who died during the famine were just such weaklings, those old and worn out by hardship, those who would not work, those who were innate enemies of the people. As for the destroyed stock—well, it too was weak."

That was that. I said impulsively, "No wonder that Europeans who fought in Russia will tell you that the only argument understood by a Slav is a crack on the head with the butt-end of a rifle."

He stared at me in amazement. "But what other argument can there be?"

This time I copied his methods and laid three Italian stamps on the table. "Perhaps your little boy would like these?"

His face lit up and he began a long description of the nine-year-old Mischa's cleverness; how he studied French and English and was first in both these languages; how he beat the other boys of his class in running; how he enjoyed the children's summer camp in the Crimea. Suddenly he broke off—"But here is Kharkov; quick, your baggage! I am staying with relatives, but to-morrow night I will call for you at the hotel and take you to the Stadium."

I thanked him and stepped out of the train into a seething, colourful mob: most strangely the shadow of Ekaterinburg had lifted.

II

My first impression of Kharkov was of a weird jumble of heat, dust, flies, noise, chimney stacks, crazy white buildings that sprang out of marshy waste land, caterpillar tractors that thundered at a good twenty miles an hour down wide streets, trams that clattered and whistles that blew, Ukrainian signs on shop-fronts, pavements far too narrow for the crowds who thronged them, and multitudes of dogs. Everybody in Kharkov kept a dog, and each dog assembled in its person the most astounding variety of breeds. After encountering a collie's head tacked on to a golden retriever's body which was supported by four undoubtedly Sealyham legs, I retreated nervously to a café and suggested a bottle of *piva*.

The girl I was with said brightly: "We are so proud of our dogs. They are very handsome, very expensive, and the licence, too, is dear."

I pointed to the atrocity which was lurking by the café door. "What breed would you call that?"

She looked perplexed: "I do not understand? It is just a dog."

She spoke more truly than she knew.

When I had recovered from an attack of mild hysteria we helter-skeltered through the city in imminent danger of meeting death by tram or tractor. As we climbed the hill at the end of the main street and emerged into a wide boulevard I clutched her arm and stared across a trim park to a series of incredible towers joined by huge spans of what looked like plate-glass. "What is that?"

"Is it not beautiful? It is the House of State Industry, the finest building in the city."

I advanced towards it timidly, half expecting the whole affair to topple on to my head. "Have you ever read Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-glass*?"

"Yes, yes. We have a translation in the library. But what has it to do with Kharkov?"

I said, "Oh, nothing," and subsided on to a bench, feeling that if I gazed at those fantastic skyscrapers any longer I should turn into the Red Queen. Turning my head the other way I caught sight of an exquisite pedestal of shining Ukrainian ice-stone which carried a group of statuary. Among the towering white skyscrapers, the glare, the bustle of the city, that pedestal rose cool, sea-blue, and lovely. It was a monument to Tazay Tchevekenko, the great Ukrainian poet and painter who laboured his life long to bring a modicum of freedom to the peasants who worked under frightful conditions. At last he was exiled from his beloved southern land because of his seditious influence, and was sent north to St. Petersburg, to spend weary years dodging in and out of prisons. He never saw the Ukraine again, never watched the magic of flower and fruit springing from her rich dark soil, never heard the lilting music of her dances. But always in his heart he remembered his own people and his own land, painted them and sang to them, prayed passionately that they might some day benefit by the lessons he had tried to teach them. When he died, exiled and lonely, in 1861, he implored the friends he had made among other revolutionaries to take his body home and bury it in the heart of the countryside he loved so much. "For they are lazy, sun-loving children," he said, "and if I lie among them I shall be a constant reminder to them that they must fight—and go on fighting."

He had his wish, and I hope he knows that over seventy years after his death young Kharkov has honoured his memory. The workers in the factories built and polished the pedestal, stone by stone; the sculptors threw themselves heart and soul into the creation of the great figure of

Tchevekenko himself and the lesser figures who form a frieze around him.

I walked closer and saw that all these figures were strangely different representations of the same woman. "Why is that?"

"Because the original woman—see, here she is, a poor, starved child working in the fields—was Tchevekenko's own character. In writing of her he showed how she gradually became aware of life, gradually longed for freedom and happiness. So the figures represent her progress until here—see, the last figure in the frieze—is almost a human being."

There was something infinitely pathetic in that remark of my dark young companion with sun-bronzed arms, supple limbs, cheerful, laughing face. . . . "*Almost a human being.*"

I turned back and glanced again at the House of State Industry. Would I ever be able to fathom why a people who could create such beauty as the Tchevekenko statuary should waste their gifts in building monstrosities in white stucco and plate-glass?

Walking back to the central square of the city we met a funeral procession which made me realize forcibly the difference between the Russia of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Russia of the Soviets. First of all came four gay young girls dressed in white, swinging a shell of red-painted wood rather like a flimsy rowing-boat. Behind them an ancient horse bedecked with scarlet rosettes drew a red cart on which lay the corpse, a shrivelled old man wrapped in a white shroud, who lay in another shell surrounded by palm-leaves. In the rear of this procession marched the relatives, all in bright colours, all laughing, chattering, singing, while following them came a brass band composed of the fattest men in Kharkov who blew a marching song loudly on their trumpets.

My companion nudged me: "He was a member of the Party: see the red coffin?"

Fascinated, I watched this extraordinarily cheerful party. They walked briskly, indifferent to the trams which screamed past them and the motor-cars that hooted, and the crowds who tried to cross the street, and the dogs which got underneath their feet. Every now and again a relative would rush forward, seize one of the palm-leaves from the hearse and use it as a switch with which to brush the flies from the dead man's face while his companions enjoyed the joke. There was no mourning, no visible sign of sorrow. The band blared and blew, and their music grew ever quicker and wilder while the girls in front performed a sort of *pas de quatre*.

"They are on their way to the crematorium. You must come and see . . ."

Hastily I changed the subject.

Next time I visit Kharkov I shall have to stay in the grand new hotel just opened near the House of State Industry and shall sigh for the friendliness of the Krasnya with its ornate front hall, its little café which is a meeting-place for lovers, its bedrooms with red velvet curtains drawn round the beds, heavy lace window-blinds, plush-covered arm-chairs, gargantuan lamp standards, and insecure balconies. For the Krasnya is a relic of the Romanoffs overlaid by Soviet modernity, and living in it is like sitting in an old-fashioned auditorium looking at some super-futuristic play being acted on the stage.

The Krasnya helped me to understanding of Kharkov, this strange city where the pulse of the second Five Year Plan beats so much more vibrantly than it does in Moscow. Since 1927 the town has been almost entirely rebuilt and it is, therefore, the most interesting place in the Union because it represents the Soviet ideal city. Government buildings, Red Army barracks, clubs for the workers, huge blocks of apartment houses, a great airport, enormous shops with astonishing window displays, factories and works for locomotives, tractors, turbines, and electrical machinery of

all kinds have sprung up in a few brief years. The population has risen by leaps and bounds as the workers troop eagerly towards this centre of industry, and now over half a million people live in it, talk in it, laugh in it—and keep dogs in it.

And here, more than in any other city, you can feel the concentrated energy, the colossal driving-power of the people towards Utopia. In your union rules your day may be limited to seven hours; but if your factory lags behind in its output you will increase those hours to seventeen with an almost hysterical enthusiasm. Nor is your day finished when your work is done; there is still your club, where you must study in order to better yourself.

There is no coercion about either work or study. If you wish you may leave both alone, but remarkably few Russians do. The reason is not merely that unless you work the State will refuse you any means of livelihood bar unprofitable begging; it is also (and, I think, primarily) because you hold within yourself an unbounded zest for knowledge of all sorts. I saw this very clearly at the Stalin Club for the 18,000 railway workers employed on the southern (Ukrainian and Crimea) lines. The men had built the club, half-moon shaped and twelve stories high, in their free time, and the whole place was, as usual, gigantic. It contained a large modern theatre where the workers wrote, produced, and acted their own plays and puppet shows, a library of over 40,000 books, studios, music-rooms, and technical workshops of all kinds. Behind it stretched a small park where the children could play anything from merry-go-rounds to see-saw, and here, too, under shady trees, were a bandstand, a restaurant, and an open-air theatre.

I spent a pleasant morning chatting to the librarian, an excitable small man who cherished a passion for the works of Anthony Hope. "English books are so popular. You have the novels, you see, and our Honoured Artists of the Union are only just beginning to write these. Our members

like them because they provide rest for tired minds. See my shelves . . .?"

I saw them. Aldous Huxley was sandwiched between Victor Hugo and d'Annunzio, R. M. Ballantyne rubbed covers with H. G. Wells, Shakespeare nestled up to Dickens, and Walter Scott leaned against *Back to Methuselah*.

The librarian danced on his tiptoes. "Here we are, Romain Rolland, André Gide, Lloyd George, our own Alexei Tolstoi. . . . Twenty-five copies have I had of his *Peter the Great* and never one in when my readers want it. . . . Here they come, Citizeness; I must attend to them. Have the goodness to sit down and study this."

He thrust a book into my hands and I retreated to a couch which had once graced an imperial palace. But I could not concentrate upon the work of one Andressky, who had written a tome on the making of steel and had received the Order of Lenin for his labours. The readers who were filing up to exchange their books were far more interesting. There were old men who had only learnt to read in the past year or two; young men who wanted works on science, geology, archaeology, philosophy, medicine. Two women plate-layers asked for the poems of Pushkin, and a third demanded *The Brothers Karamazoff*. From above the shelves a bust of Gorki looked down, benevolent, satisfied.

I wandered upstairs to the studios. Here not only the workers but their wives also were painting, sculpting, drawing, modelling. A middle-aged woman with gnarled hands glanced up from her work and pointed to the sprays of cherry-blossom she was trying to reproduce. "*Krassivi*" (beautiful), she said raptly.

I nodded. There are two Russian words that always make me want to weep: one is *krassivi* and the other *pažaluste* (please). Hear them said in the liquid Russian voice and your heart goes to water within you. (I know a hard-boiled engineer who gave away all his boots when

working near the Caspian because his men came and said, "*pažaluste.*")

The woman went on painting and I bent over her shoulder. Her work was crude, elementary; her determination amazing. For a short hour each day, before the branching cherry-blossom, she captured a sense of beauty never known before.

In the next room lots of small boys were making a model of Dneipropetrovsk and the Dneiprogos Dam which they showed me with pride. I had long ago given up asking young Russians what they wished to do when they grew up, so I said: "And are you all going to be engineers?" They said "yes" in chorus and their master beamed. A little creature in a spotless white blouse sidled up to me: "My sister is going to be a pianist: she is practising in room 44."

I walked along and opened the door. Three pianos were the only furniture in the wide, airy room. Perched on high stools before them were three tiny girls, backs straight, pigtailed aquiver, playing a Chopin *étude*. They were so absorbed that they never even noticed me. . . .

This beehive of industry wanted a lot of thinking over. It wasn't a show place—not even the Soviets could stage such a spectacle for the benefit of one solitary foreigner. I went out into the park and sat down beside a thin-faced youth in dungarees who was reading *Anna Karenina*. "You like our club?" he asked.

"It is wonderful—almost too good to be true."

"Why do you say that? Don't the workers have clubs in England?"

I thought of the average working-men's club, the long room with a billiard-table, a few uneasy chairs, some aged magazines and rickety bridge-tables, and a bar at the far end. "In some of the big factories they have them, but not like this. Tell me, is it true that it is run by your trade union?"

"Yes, and we control twenty-three smaller clubs in the

Ukraine. My wife is upstairs now," he added pridefully. "She too works on the railway and she is learning cooking in her free time. For myself I want to become a scientist."

"What are you now?"

"A signalman. But I come here to lectures every night. Next year I shall be ready to sit my entrance examination for the Kiev Academy of Sciences."

I pointed to *Anna Karenina*. "You are not studying now."

"Ah, no, Citizeness. It is my rest day. Our Stalin says . . ."

I tilted my chair back and looked up through the leaves at the deep blue sky. Near by children shrieked delightedly in the playground, from the bandstand came sounds of tuning-up, floating down from an open window was the tinkle of the three little girls' pianos, all round me were happy people, working strenuously with either mind or body. "Yes," I agreed, "our Stalin says . . ."

And to myself I thought: You've done it now. You've gone through the glittering windows of the House of State Industry—through the looking-glass.

III

"In two years' time," said the little doctor, "the tuberculosis statistics will be lower than those of the United States, there will be no venereal disease, no typhus, and precious little enteric. Their surgery is superb and they are losing fewer childbirth cases every day."

I said "yes" dreamily and supped my *bortsch*. He was a dear little man, Ukrainian born, who was paying his first visit home from New York for twenty-five years, but he had already stuffed me with medical statistics throughout a long, hot evening.

"I can't understand you," he sighed. "You love Russia; you agree she's done the biggest thing the world's ever seen,

and yet you look bored as soon as I begin to tell you of the miracles she is doing for the health of her peoples."

"Because you've chosen to tell me with figures. They're the one Russian delight I can't enthuse over. Everybody I meet gives me statistics about something; it's the most inhuman trait in the Russian character."

"But they're supremely important. What is the use, for example, of your not being able to tell the people the exact number of Communist Party members when you get home?"

"Three million is near enough for me. But I wish you'd tell me more about the Kharkov you left in 1911?"

It wasn't a pretty story; but it kept me so interested that I told the waiter I would finish my supper later. The doctor's father had been a peasant on an estate near the town and had been arrested for complicity in some political plot. After that life was grim for his wife and six children, so grim that by the time an ill-spelt letter (written by the local shopkeeper) had reached an uncle in New York and the uncle had sent back money for the eldest boy's passage, three out of the six were dead. Terrified, the gawky boy of fourteen set out on his long journey, his belongings carried in a carpet bag. The rough kindness of his uncle, a cabinet-maker, could not lessen his shrinking from the inferno that was New York, could not help his sufferings when forced to run errands for a Yiddish butcher through streets the very names of which he could not understand. There was no news from home as his family were illiterate and the shopkeeper charged heavily for every letter he wrote.

Somehow the boy kept his job, learnt English, saved a few dollars which he sent to a mother who never received them, went to night-school and determined to become a doctor. But the War came, bringing with it agonized days and nights when he wondered what had happened to his people. Service in France with the American Army was an intensified nightmare, since he was so near to them yet could not reach the maelstrom that was Russia in 1918. Not until

five years after the Armistice did he hear any news; and then it was a plea for help from his sister. The father was home, his health completely broken by the privations of a Siberian prison; the mother had died of starvation; the brother had work as a street cleaner, but his wages were so small and the price even of potatoes so high that it was impossible to get enough to eat. . . .

"Those years, 1923 to 1929, were the worst for me to endure," said the doctor. "Having heard from my people again I longed always to come home. My father died, my brother and sister developed sicknesses as a result of malnutrition, I could do nothing except send them money. I cannot describe to you what it was like to receive cheerful letters once more. My sister had married the manager of a *kolkhoz* (collective farm); my brother was at Kiev taking a course in economics; food was fairly plentiful and the Government were working wonders. Since then they have never looked back. The *kolkhoz* flourishes and my brother has a splendid post in Kherson; when I came home two months ago they met me at the station with their children and showed me my city swept free of squalor and disease and grown to five times its original size. Do you wonder that I love the Soviets? And since then I have travelled to Leningrad, to Gorki, to Kazan, to Kiev, to the Crimea, and I have seen for myself the wonders that have been done for the people. Give Russia another twenty-five years of peace and she will be the greatest power in the world!"

Long after he had said good night and departed I sat over the remainder of my supper, thinking of his story. All the books written by clever foreigners who came to Russia with a mission and left her with that mission still intact; all the little left-wing papers that bowdlerized the articles in *Pravda* and *Isvestia*; all the orators who pointed to Moscow and demanded freedom for the proletariat shared a laughable ignorance of the country of which they spoke. True understanding of the Soviet Union could be won only by

men and women like the little doctor, people who knew both the old Russia and the new. . . .

The old waiter dumped my tea-glass in front of me. "You look tired and sad: is there anything wrong?"

"No, I was only thanking heaven that my great-great grandfather built the first railway between Leningrad and Moscow." Then I roused myself: "What time is it?"

"Eleven o'clock. The engineers will be coming in to supper in a few minutes."

"Then I will take my tea upstairs with me. I can't face a hundred and fifty of them to-night."

The waiter looked anxious. "But Citizeness, they like so much to see the *Angleeski* eat."

I began to giggle. He rocked to and fro with mirth. The other waiters clustered round the table and joined in our merriment. The standing joke of the Krasnya was that the engineers, at the end of a hot, wearisome day in conference, liked to see the *Angleeski* eat.

It seemed a pity to disappoint them: I stayed where I was.

Presently they came in singly, then in threes and fours, then in a steady stream until the long dining-room was filled to overflowing. Some were shaved, scrubbed, and in white blouses: some were in shabby trousers and shirts still grimy with pit-dust: all were cheerful.

"Hullo, Citizeness, how are your views on the Soviets to-day?"

"Had your supper already, Citizeness? *Must* we have these prim English ways?"

"When the band plays will you dance with me, Citizeness?"

They were so nice, so enthusiastic, so kindly. All day they had been sitting in a stuffy room exchanging views on their work without thought of how much material good such exchange might do rival engineers. That was one of the most praiseworthy things about this new Russia: people of a certain trade met, told all their recent inventions, hoped

only that the telling would enable the State to make progress. In other countries men who had an idea of personal value sat behind barricades, either mental or physical, and tried to sell their brains to the highest bidder: here they talked openly, albeit with a childlike swagger, and willingly let their world know developments which might revolutionize industry. If somebody else, another factory, carried these developments a stage further—that was a matter for acclamation.

One hundred and fifty engineers ate: noisily and impolitely. The band sidled in and took up their position in an alcove and played *Ain't it Grand to be Blooming Well Dead?* I foxtrotted with men from the Donets coal-fields, men from Central Asia, men from Lake Baikal. . . .

Across the room a director of a Moscow engineering works, fat, fifty, and languishing, brought romance to my middle years by sending his second-in-command to treaty with me in bad French.

He was an attractive person with a white suit, a mouthful of gold teeth, and a sense of humour. "If you would drink tea with us, Madame?"

I drooped my eyelids and felt like a courtesan of the Second Empire. "But certainly, Monsieur, in the foyer."

One hundred and forty-eight engineers enjoyed the joke as I walked out.

The foyer was the little gallery adjoining the dining-room. Here the fat engineer sprawled in an easy chair, trying vainly to tuck his once white and always recalcitrant shirt inside the belt which clasped amazingly bright purple trousers to his middle.

"Madame is disposed . . ." said the second-in-command.

". . . To made conversation," I amended, and remembered the Danish Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

"Tell her," said Purple Trousers, "that I love her blue eyes."

The gold teeth of his interpreter winked: I said, "From

study of your country I understand that good Communists forswore admiration of any eyes?"

"Tell her, NO! Our Stalin says that we are like generals in war-time. While the battle wages all our energies must be concentrated upon the winning of it. But when the battle is fought and won—well then we are entitled to romance and the society of women whom we desire." He rolled his eyes to such effect that I felt the joke had gone far enough.

"You need not interpret: I understand Russian."

Purple Trousers sat up, all amorousness departed, and shook me warmly by the hand. "Good, good! Now we can talk about Bessemer steel."

After that we got on splendidly. He drew me diagrams showing the various processes through which the steel had to go; he described in detail the management of the steel works; he told me what happened to the steel when it was finally turned out, a finished product. An hour and a half later, when he had lumbered off in search of *piva*, I asked the second-in-command, "I would far rather hear about steel than about blue eyes, but why did your comrade change his tactics so suddenly when he found I could speak his language?"

"Oh, his love-making was just politeness. He knows that European women expect pretty speeches. Besides, French is the language of love: one cannot discuss the real things of life in French."

I felt a little indignant. Politeness, indeed! Then I realized how illogical my indignation was, and how eminently sane the Russian viewpoint. But I understood now why most European and American women disliked Russian men: they sensed, although they did not know it, the insincerity behind their fatuous compliments.

Purple Trousers ambled back carrying a glass which he set on the table in front of me. "Whisky-soda!" he announced and laughed hugely at his mastery over two English

words. Seeing my incredulous expression he explained that a bottle of this "curious spirit" as he called it, was kept in the café for the benefit of English tourists.

A small crowd gathered round our table. It was evident that they regarded my drink as a potion that might have immediate effects which would be disastrous to me but fearfully amusing to them. I took a large gulp—and spluttered violently. Until one has tried whisky with Narzan water one can have no least idea of the taste of the hemlock cup. The crowd sighed ecstatically. Spurred on by their enthusiasm I took another gulp.

Purple Trousers looked anxious: "Is it not good?"

I said mendaciously: "Very good, Comrade. But in England women do not drink whisky: only men."

"But you have equality of the sexes there?"

That was unanswerable. I took a third gulp and subsided in my chair while the second-in-command rushed up with a glass of cranberry-juice cordial. "If you add this to the whisky, Citizeness, you will find the taste quite different."

The crowd pressed forward eagerly. An *Angleeski* drinking the dreaded whisky-soda was exciting enough; but an *Angleeski* mixing that sinister drink with cranberry-juice was really thrilling.

Desperately I clutched Purple Trousers. "In England it is customary for the host to drink from his guest's glass."

To my delight he swallowed that incredible story, and the whisky and Narzan, in one mouthful. The crowd applauded; the second-in-command winked his gold teeth; I sipped my cranberry-juice and felt machiavellian. "Tell me more about Bessemer steel?"

The dawn was breaking over the preposterous roof of the House of State Industry before I went to bed.

IV

Days in Kharkov were a kaleidoscope of white tunics, yellow dogs, glittering factories, clamour of Ukrainian speech, jokes from engineers, zooming aeroplanes, a multitude of sights and sounds, that exhilarated the mind yet left one exhausted by the time twilight crept about the city, dulling its vitality for a short space, bringing back memories of a low, flat-roofed Kharkov with streets of trampled dung and inhabitants who slunk in the shadows.

Nights in Kharkov were a kaleidoscope of lights: white, green, purple, orange, red, and blue. Far to the south-east they blazed in the dark sky above the Donets coal-fields; far to the north-west they shimmered above the aerodrome, the stadium, and the factories; while the centre of the city burned brilliant, sending a thousand coloured rays into the upper air.

The man who had shot the Tsar had not kept his appointment: a scribbled note had told me that he was too busy working out a scheme for the electrification of certain railways to spare the time for pleasure, but just when I was feeling that I was a poor sort of Red Queen he turned up, smiling and courteous as ever in a white duck suit.

"And now, we will promenade?"

Several weeks of the Soviet Union had inured me to "the promenade." It consisted of a steady tramp of anything up to fifteen miles and it required a stout heart, a lightly clad body, and feet unhampered by European shoes. In a very dirty silk frock and my heelless rubber atrocities I padded happily beside my companion up the crowded main street. The hour was 11 p.m., but the inhabitants of Kharkov were still shopping. Dark Ukrainian men with flashing smiles, high-necked white blouses, and children perched on their shoulders, elbowed a way good-humouredly for their chattering wives; people gathered before one window which showed a mechanical clown making Pekinese

dogs turn somersaults for boxes of chocolates, and before another in which a circular escalator revolved with packages of scent and cigarettes; kiosks selling fruit-juices in large glass containers remarkably reminiscent of the chemists' shops of my youth abounded. . . . Perfumery gave way to groceries and clothes in Kharkov. "*The Very Latest*" said the label on a shoddy red coat of antiquated cut; and the windows of the food-stores were gay with tins of fruits, vegetables, and fish, with coloured cartons of cereals, with mounds of most appetizing biscuits, with loops and whorls of pink and brown-skinned sausages.

"You should buy a fur coat to take home with you," said the engineer seriously. "They are very cheap here."

Four hundred roubles—400 ninepences, for a jacket of really good ermine: 600 roubles for a full-length sealskin coat, or for a glory in sable that would cost every penny of £800 in England. Of course, the skins were badly cured, the lining abominable, the cut deplorable; but under the skilful hands of those who live near Ludgate Hill the result would be magnificent.

But the temperature was in the nineties, and mere thought of furs was more than could be borne. Months later, shivering through an English winter, I was to mourn lost bargains seen in Kharkov, Tiflis, and Batum, and to wish that I had been more sensible, but at the moment the glamour of high summer in Russia held me. Never again, so I told the engineer scornfully, would I require furs.

We strolled on through the noisy streets until we reached a park glowing with myriads of fairy lights, and in this romantic and peaceful setting we sat under a frangipanni tree . . . and sucked bricks of chocolate-coated ice-cream which trickled pleasantly down our parched throats. I have a vague idea that the engineer discussed the works of Kant and Hegel in between mouthfuls, but my memory on that point is hazy. . . .

It was midnight before we reached the Stadium. The

vast arena was filled with young Russians in brief white tunics and shorts who formed intricate patterns as they ran rhythmically, one behind the other. The great arc-lamps which blazed down from an overhead cable bathed them in gold—gold upthrown heads, gold arms, gold limbs. The Red Army band who sat, naked to the waist on a high dais, flashed gold torsos as they played, and as background to their melody was the soft swish-swish of hundreds of pairs of sand-shoes on the hard, gold earth. Suddenly the music changed; grew quicker. The runners swung gold arms above their heads, clapped gold hands, sent gold limbs bounding into the steps of a folk-dance. The scene was a symphony in gold, dazzling, incredible.

The music stopped. The lights were dimmed. The dancers were no longer ethereal beings but sunburnt boys and girls of rather ungainly figure. A little chill wind sprang up, and I tugged at the engineer's arm. "Let us go."

He peered down at me. "I too hate to watch the death of beauty."

We trailed back to the Krasnya through streets bereft of radiance but still crammed with people. "You are tired; you have not yet won our faculty for wakefulness."

I protested. Instead of rising at 7.30 a.m. and going to bed at 10.30 p.m., as I did at home, I rose at 9.30 a.m., and went to bed at dawn. Surely that was not too bad?

"You still sleep too much: sleep is a waste of time."

The idea of a Russian talking about "waste of time"!

v

Kharkov lacked the serene poise of Moscow. Indeed, it rather frightened me. It was intensely young, strident, jovial; the whole *tempo* of its life was speeded up to a tremendous pace. Hammers tapped frantically as new buildings received doors, windows, and floors; hods of bricks whirled from hand to hand; tractors bearing marble from

the Urals raised clouds of dust in their thunderous progress through the streets; even the tram-car bells had a fierce, staccato ping that almost pierced the ear-drums. And in this city of high white buildings, eager, thrusting people, and yellow dogs I knew a great yearning for something *old* to look at.

"Look at the earth," said the little doctor severely. "Go and stay with my sister on the *kolkhoz*."

I went, in an ancient Ford driven by his brother-in-law, a huge man in tattered shirt and the inevitable striped trousers who gave a blood-curdling yell every time we struck a pot-hole. In the back of the car were two crates of quacking ducks and a family of kittens in a basket; on the running-boards were three small boys who shrieked questions about England at me; on my lap was the brother-in-law's baby, a placid and abnormally heavy infant of eighteen months who sucked his thumb and chortled when we negotiated an extra bad bump. The road was a series of ruts which meandered through fields and orchards, and the mud, despite the fact that the rainfall for the past month had been limited to a couple of thunderstorms, came up to the axles. By the time we were half-way to the farm we were splattered from head to foot with the stuff.

"Very healthy, this mud," roared the brother-in-law.

I nodded dubiously. Certainly the baby seemed to be enjoying it, for he bounced with delight as he sucked the rich dark mire from his chubby fists, but I did not feel particularly cheerful. The temptation to undergo a mud-pack beauty treatment (this idea had assailed me once or twice in the past few years), left me for good, and a glance in the driving-mirror appalled me. The doctor's sister would hardly expect a negress as guest.

We jolted on, the hot sun hardening my brown mask, the kittens mewling shrilly, the boys shouting, the ducks quacking. In retrospect Kharkov seemed peaceful.

The brother-in-law slewed the car through a gate with

a jerk which sent the ducks into a frenzy and the three small boys into a pool of mud which enveloped them up to their waists. "Here we are!"

Late that afternoon I lay in a clover field and knew all contentment. I had washed away every trace of mud in the deep, cool river and had dined gloriously off black bread and three platefuls of *bortsch* in the communal dining-room where the farm-workers took their midday meal. Beside me the baby chewed clover blossom while his mother knitted a sock and regaled me with stories of the farm.

"There were originally three farms, but the Government collectivized them into one. We have over 150 workers, and most of them have children, so we are a large family. In the summer the wives and older children help in the fields and that is why they all have meals in the main building. There is a crèche for the little ones and we have our own school. The orchards have only been planted three years but they are coming ahead finely this summer, and our sugar-beet is doing splendidly, also our cucumbers and pumpkins. My husband is experimenting with vegetables and flowers in cold frames, so that we can get all the year round crops."

I said dreamily, "I like your very clean pigs."

"Ah, yes! Seventy-five we have now on this farm alone, and of course the workers each have one or two of their own, and a cow, and chickens."

"And can they do what they like with their own?"

"Certainly. They can market them or eat them, as they wish. The same with their crops. Each cottage has its own plot of land with which the State has nothing to do."

"What about your collective crops and stock?"

"The State buys about 10 per cent from us at a very low price, and we are free to sell the rest in the open market. Then we pay the State 5 per cent of our takings and the balance is divided among the workers. It is a good and a fair method."

I rolled over on to my side and looked at this woman.

She had known fierce hardship; she had six children and would have a seventh before summer was out; yet her gentle brown face was smooth and unlined, her back erect, her eyes serene.

"You are a very admirable person. If I were you I should be haunted by the past. I should also grumble about the amount of work which you seem to get through so easily every day."

Her eyes clouded. "We all have doors in our minds which we must keep shut." Then a smile curved her wide mouth as she glanced at her baby. "I have so much to be thankful for—my home, my children, a blessed sense of security. Until eight years ago I knew nothing of what life could mean. Do you remember what Pascal said . . .? That peoples' thoughts always turn either to the past or the future, and that therefore they never live in the present, but only *hope* to live. I was like that once: now I am alive in the present."

I blinked. "And where did you read Pascal?"

"Oh, we study hard in the winter evenings—it can be very cold, you know, even here in Ukraine. Last winter we had 20 degrees of frost. But I love the long nights when we sit in the warmth from the stove with our books, or listen to the radio—they have excellent lectures on the radio. I could not even read until I was eighteen, but since then I have learnt much." She rolled up her knitting, tucked it into her apron pocket, and picked up the baby. "We must go home now as we all cook separate suppers for our families. You will sup with us, I hope, but you are going to sleep in Yurka and Anna's cottage because we have no extra room."

I followed her slowly through the knee-high clover, up the trodden path between the sugar-beet, across the yard where the men were watering the oxen. In the main building women were collecting their children from the crèche preparatory to taking them to their own homes for the night. On the long veranda the older boys and girls

laughed, and practised somersaults, and boxed. On the wooden steps those men who had finished work lounged with cigarettes and newspapers.

The light died and the dusk was sweet with the scent of new-cut hay. The workers drifted back after their supper to the square behind the main building, where they danced barefoot to an accordion. Digging my toes into the warm earth I thought that this was the true happiness I had come to find, the happiness which came from the very soil of Russia and had nothing to do with the roar and clatter of great new cities. Suddenly I looked up: silhouetted against the last faint glow in the western sky was a monstrous shape, an immense tractor from Stalingrad. . . .

Yurka and Anna were an old couple, bent with rheumatism and long lives of hard work. Their little cottage was spotlessly clean and my tiny room was entirely filled by a gigantic brass bed. Fortunately the door opened outwards, so I was able to take a running jump and land on the springy mattress which served me for dressing-room as well as resting-place. Anna told me with pride that it was "a beautiful bed from the home of a rich *kulak*," and she did not exaggerate. For the first time since I had come to Soviet Russia I was sound asleep by eleven o'clock.

Next morning Yurka took me round his plot of land, half of which was under wheat. In the other half he had cabbages, beet, pumpkins, and lettuce, all growing finely, all well tilled. Five piglets squeaked in unison and a score of hens cackled in the yard. "Half an acre," he said triumphantly, "and look . . .!" He flung open a shed door. "Enough grain stored to last us through a winter. Not that I shall use it; I shall buy whatever we need because we never know when we shall have another rainy day."

His old eyes were full of sadness: I thought, Yurka cannot shut any door in his mind, he is too tired, too full of sorrows.

"But do you not trust the Soviets, Yurka?"

"Yes, yes! They have done wonders with the people and

the land. But can they keep it up? You do not know how it is—how many enemies there are to fight, how much work there is still to do. And most of the older peasants, well . . .” He threw back his head, raised his hand as though to drink, rubbed his stomach. “Vodka,” he said simply.

I nodded: the problem of these older folk, with their desire for oblivion at a handful of kopeks a glass, was a very real one. In their youth they had slaved, even as Yurka had slaved, and received one gold rouble and a sack of grain for a whole season’s work. But between those far-off days and present plenty lay a decade so dreadful that all memory of previous hardships was blotted out, and they stepped fearfully, mistrusting every movement on the part of those in authority lest all sense of security, however meagre, should vanish once more. Ridden by past horrors they could not, and never would, conceive of a world wherein means of livelihood was established, static.

“But Yurka, the bulk of the population is young?”

He leaned on his spade and regarded me thoughtfully. “That is right; and they learn much. But even Stalin will find it difficult to bring peace to Russia. We must quarrel, always quarrel.”

All around me the work of the great farm was going on happily, urgently. In the distance the giant tractor zoomed through the hay-fields; near at hand the men worked in the greenhouses, the frames, the orchards, while the women and older children hoed the long lines of vegetables. Voices rang out, clear and cheerful on the morning air, little boys skipped down to the river to bathe, even the piglets rooted joyously. The shadow in Yurka’s eyes found no mirror in this peaceful place.

My host came up to ask me if I would care to help with the pricking out of the cucumbers. Following him to the greenhouse I said, “Do you really quarrel that much?”

His laughter shook the cherries from the trees. “You have been listening to Yurka! He is suspicious of us all, because

he cannot understand our development and our freedom. Poor old man, he lost four sons, two in the Civil War and two from starvation. But Anna is different altogether: she has a heart, that woman."

I slammed two pots together so furiously that they smashed into smithereens. "There are times when this Soviet self-sufficiency makes me sick. *Heart* indeed; you don't know the meaning of the word!" Then I looked up and saw his honest, puzzled face. "I'll pay for the pots," I added helplessly.

But a mere matter of one rouble fifty was not going to extricate me so easily from the effect of my outburst. Through a terrifically hot morning my host argued with me: Did I not understand that it was Yurka's duty as a citizen to smother all thought of the past and to strive only for the future? Did I not realize that the Party had performed miracles for Russia? Did I not admit enthusiastically that collectivization had been good for the workers?"

"Yes, yes, yes. But while the Soviets have made life worth living for the hundred odd races in the Union they have intensified the ruthlessness which has always been a Slav characteristic."

We went in to dinner in a sort of armed neutrality.

"The Air Force men are camping near the river for manoeuvres," said my hostess.

I brightened: my affection for the Red Army was deep. "Will they let me watch them, Citizeness?"

"And why not?"

"I thought spectators might not be allowed."

"They will be only too pleased: they are very proud of their flying."

All afternoon I lay on my back in the clover field watching the great black planes wheel and dive and swoop in the sharp blue sky, and knew sheer panic when men swung themselves negligently into the air and pulled the strings which opened their parachutes. Miraculously they floated

to the earth, kicked their legs cheerfully, folded up their parachutes and raced to the landing-ground to await their next turn in this fearsome sport.

About six o'clock they finished practice for the day and two of the pilots came and squatted beside me, proffering cigarettes. "You like our flying, Citizeness?"

I sat up and shook clover-blossom out of my hair. "I have seen air displays in England, in Germany, and in Italy, but I have never seen men fly so easily, so confidently, as you do. It's almost supernatural to me, this careless mastery of the air."

"We are the bird men of the world. Only when we fly are we in our natural element. When you return to England will you please tell people about our manœuvres?"

There was the childlike attitude once more. Men of any other nation would have said: "When you get home please tell people just how terrifying we can be in air-battle." These young men with brilliant eyes gazing steadfastly out of brown faces had no desire to intimidate; all they wished for was appreciation of their prowess. "We fly much better than the Poles," they informed me.

"That reminds me: when I came through Negoreloje there was a queer story about a Polish aeroplane which lost its way in the mist, came down on the Russian side of the frontier and was never heard of again."

The brilliant eyes were suddenly blank. "Even with blind flying, Citizeness, it should be impossible to fly more than five miles out of one's course. If an aeroplane strays more than that distance beyond its rightful frontier . . . well, it deserves punishment."

"Yes, but *what happened* to it?"

The pilots made wide gestures with their arms. "Nobody knows," they said simply.

And nobody ever would know. Set a Slav against a Slav and you get a finesse in reprisal never bettered by the Borgias. Give a Slav twentieth-century weapons and you

will find him applying age-old artifice to such weapons. Rough justice with a vengeance, and yet these youths and thousands of their fellow pilots were guileless and peace-loving little boys . . . until the Tatar blood showed through a scratch on their skin.

"We are going to bathe, Citizeness. Will you join us?"

The idea was pleasant; but when I returned from changing into my bathing-suit I found two naked bronzed figures awaiting me. They regarded me with consternation, and one of them plucked anxiously at my costume: "Have you a deformity, Citizeness, that you wear this?"

I said confusedly that in England everybody wore bathing-suits.

"But why?"

Unable to reply I dived from the bank and came up to find both pilots lolloping like porpoises beside me. "Such fun!" they cried, "Such fun!"

Embarrassment which, after all, was due to the prudery born of civilization, departed. It was fun to tread cool water, to turn somersaults, to race with crawl-strokes from one end of a long pool to the other, to float dreamily under the clear evening sun.

Several more pilots joined us, diving from a little bridge higher up river. When I flopped out, to lie face downwards among the clover and regain my breath, the river held about twenty men, and the small boys and girls from the farm were eagerly divesting themselves of their few clothes. With my mouth close to the warm sweet grass I thought how good Russia was. . . .

All of a sudden voices sounded; a quick bass rumble of French was followed by the unmistakable accent of South Carolina. ". . . And I told that man that if he thought he could fox me into believing he knew how to grow chrysanthemums . . . ! And his pumpkins won't do any good with all that mush around them. Why, back home on my brother's farm . . ."

I struggled into a sitting position. This was awful! I had forgotten my hostess's warning that some tourists from Kharkov were coming to see over the farm. Tripping across the clover towards me came an elderly and stout Frenchman sporting a red badge in his buttonhole, while behind him, squashing the fragrant flowers under square-toed shoes, was a very large female in a bright green frock, and yellow cotton gloves, who waved a pink parasol above her head.

"All is well," said the Frenchman in Russian, "all is well." Then he regarded me doubtfully and reverted to his native tongue. "Do you speak French?"

"Yes."

"English?"

"Yes."

"Ah-h!" He plopped down beside me. "Then have the goodness to remove this terrible woman. She is driving me distracted. Do you not like my Russian phrase? I learnt it on the Volga steamer. What a river that is, my God, what a river! But tell me, why do they make all tourists go below decks when the ship passes under a bridge?"

Before I could answer the square female bore down upon us. "Well!" She looked at me and she looked at the children who were gallivanting up and down the bank; then she stiffened visibly as she caught sight of three pilots about to dive from the bridge. (To give them their due they spared her blushes by plunging into the water as quickly as possible, but their chivalry did not spare me her wrath.) "And that," she said icily, "is Government by the proletariat."

"All is well!" shouted the Frenchman.

I said feebly that politics didn't count when you came to swimming and that I admired young Russia for its complete unself-consciousness.

South Carolina snorted. "You can learn English, but let me tell you you are an abandoned woman! The idea of sitting here in a—a—a most inadequate swim-suit while all

these nude men racket around. I've brought light to heathen Japanese for the past seventeen years and I *was* on my way to London to a great Conference of Missionaries, but I just cannot bear the idea of leaving this country to its wickedness." She raised the sunshade as barrier between her and the swimmers and added, "I'll have to stop over a while and have an interview with that Stalin!"

The Frenchman, relieved at her lack of interest in his affairs, burst into ribald song.

"What's he singing?" She poked me hard in the ribs with her parasol.

It was a blessing that she knew no French; otherwise she probably would have thrown an apoplectic fit.

"Are you Russian?" she demanded, irked by my shake of the head.

I felt murderous. This woman, with her glaring virtue, her insistence upon convention, her overwhelming wish to "save" a group of wholesome, natural people who had never imagined evil, would have led a serpent into Eden. . . . Even the sun hid himself behind a small cloud.

"I wish I *were* Russian."

She shut the parasol with a snap and plumped down beside me. "If that isn't a terrible thing to say! Now you listen to me. . . ." She launched into an evangelical peroration which was punctuated by the word "Hallelujah!" Not until the tail-end of her speech, when I managed to catch the words "Sister Aimée Macpherson," did I see daylight.

"Are you a—a follower of Mrs. Macpherson?"

Animosity was forgotten: she beamed upon me. "I am just that. Seven years last April I went to her church when I was on leave and believe me . . ." She went off again into an eulogy of her leader which savoured strongly of blasphemy.

The pilots and the children, now clothed and in their right mind, were acting a mime play with the Frenchman which led to such uproarious mirth that South Carolina

broke off her song of praise to glare at them. "Look at that! Did you ever see such an exhibition of childishness? You know, I just can't understand a woman like yourself, with your education—I mean, it's obvious to me that you know the trend of idealistic thought in civilized countries—tolerating these creatures at all."

This speech needed sorting out. Five minutes ago she had called me "an abandoned woman," and since then I had merely said two short sentences neither of which had anything to do with idealistic thought. Yet in some sinister manner she now pinned me down as belonging to her own hierarchy . . . and I was determined to come unpinned.

"You have got me all wrong: what is much worse you've got Russia all wrong. These people are not *childish*, they're *childlike*. They remember all the things we have so dismally forgotten, and they have a sublime faith in goodness. What right have you to try to destroy that faith?"

"Faith?" she snorted. "Why, they've got no religion!"

Argument proved hopeless. At the end of half an hour my mind held wild vision of the leaders of the Party practising "hot gospelling" in white robes with golden trumpets. Presently her voice petered out. "The whole thing is just disturbing me to death. I wish I'd never come by Trans-Siberian."

My impulse to murder died. She looked so pathetic and she hated Russia so much.

Suddenly she sighed: "What wouldn't I give for a nice chocolate malted milk?"

VI

Somebody had told me that the time to arrive at Rostov-on-Don was in the evening, when lights starred the banks of the great river and its waters flowed, smooth and black, under a rising moon. "I will take the day train," I told the bureau in the Krasnya.

The clerk smiled and played a tune on the wooden balls strung on wire which every Russian uses to count with: "The night train," he replied gently.

"No, the *day* train. It leaves here about 9.45."

He smiled again. "The pass may take some time."

"But I want to go to-morrow."

"Come back in three hours."

I gave him six. When I approached him he handed me a railway pass for the train leaving Kharkov that night at 10 p.m.

"Look here, this won't do. There *is* a day train, because I've looked it up in the time-table and inquired at the station. Why can't I go on it?"

"It is a great mistake to travel by day, Citizeness. So hot, so crowded."

"But that surely is my affair? You can't say there is any real reason why I shouldn't take the day train?"

"Oh, no. But here is a pass already made out for your sleeping berth and everything."

I wasn't going to be thwarted. I sat down to wait. After all, this was Russia and time meant nothing. Twenty-four hours later the clerk produced a pass for the day train. "You are very obstinate, Citizeness."

We grinned at each other, each conscious of a good foeman.

A few hours later I wished I had relented and accepted the pass for the night train.

The compartment was stifling; my companion a traveller from Moscow to Baku. She was a small woman with all of a beauty parlour smeared over her rather plain face, a crushed frock of flimsy yellow muslin, pink cotton stockings, and scarlet felt bedroom slippers. The small table between us was so littered with scent bottles, powder boxes, and a manicure outfit that there was no place for my book, while the lady's entire wardrobe was draped on the racks.

"I am a psychiatrist," she told me. "But I have heart trouble so am going to a Rest Home on the Caspian."

Rather bewildered by the smell of *peau d'Espagne* I blinked at her. Psychiatry as her profession would have been my last guess.

She began a long lecture about "maniacal repressions"; the compartment grew even hotter and more scented; I removed my shoes and the attendant brought glasses of boiling tea; goods trains rattled past with armed guards standing on the engine footplates and loads of coal, timber, stone, and marble; every few minutes we stopped, either to let the goods traffic have priority or to pick up passengers from crowded little stations. It had been enormously foolish of me to forget the fact that almost all the heavy railway transport operates during the day, while the night is reserved for passenger traffic. If I had not been so determined to triumph over the clerk in the Krasnya my memory might have worked better.

Presently the psychiatrist stopped her lecture in mid-sentence and fell asleep with her mouth wide open. I opened the window, was enveloped in a cloud of dust, shut it again hastily, and stared gloomily out at quarries, factories, and blast-furnaces. Six men in gas-masks suddenly popped up on a factory balcony—a grim sight which did not lighten my mood.

Soon, however, we left industry behind and passed again through fertile steppes irrigated by little streams and ponds where cows and nude children wallowed in amity. At every station girls and boys ran up and down the train with huge baskets of multi-coloured roses or paper pokes of cherries and strawberries. As usual when surveying a Russian landscape I felt like a pygmy: the sky was so immense, the horizon so far.

The attendant came in with more tea, told me it was three o'clock and suggested I should go along to the dining-car as they had electric fans there. The small remaining part of me which had not melted made an effort to rise. An electric fan!

In the "travel" carriage dinner was in full swing. I stumbled over gherkins, loaves of black bread, and pots of boiling water; over feet, heads, hands, and babies. Nobody paid any attention: they were all too busy eating. And the minute I entered the dining-car we stopped in a station—and the electric fans stopped too.

At the far end an unshaven man in a dirty shirt, ragged flannel trousers, and bare feet lounged in a corner seat eating cherries and spitting the stones with great accuracy into an ash-tray. His manners, however, were irreproachable. He rose, bowed, explained he was the head waiter, and ushered me to a seat. Then he brought the bag of cherries and the ash-tray, and sat down opposite to me. "The cabbage soup is very good," he said.

I could have imagined a better dish for a grilling day, but I had eaten nothing since breakfast and probably would not get my next meal until midnight, so I ordered it. No sooner was it set before me than the train moved on with a series of terrific jolts which spilt the soup all over the cloth, whereat the waiter grinned, mopped up the mess with bread and tilted the plate by means of a hunk under one side of it. "All is well," he said breezily.

I said: "Don't the fans work?"

"Sometimes; but they do not matter. The heat is so nice." He took another mouthful of cherries.

I struggled with tough veal and excellent fried potatoes and murmured assent. Across the aisle three Red Army men chaffed a little waitress about a cameo brooch she was wearing. Above our heads a gramophone belonging to one of them blared from the rack. Through the door leading to the kitchen I caught an appalling glimpse of the very fat cook digging his fingers into the ice-cream pail.

"Ice-cream?" asked the waiter.

I said no rather hurriedly.

"Then share my cherries!" He pushed the bag towards me.

When I got back to my compartment the psychiatrist was sitting up holding a slab of bacon from which she carved chunks with a penknife. She had brought two and a half pounds of it from Moscow: with luck it would last her until she reached Baku in about two days' time.

Once again I settled down to watch the landscape. The steppes had given way to low hills on the sides of which little villages of squat white cottages with green shutters clung limpet-wise. In the valleys were fields of sunflowers, newly planted orchards, lazy cattle standing knee-deep in clover. At every station the entire population, their work done for the day, squatted on the platforms or hung over the railings to watch the trains go by, and as I studied their happy, excited faces I thought that people of another race would find discontent rather than pleasure in seeing these great trains passing to and from places which must always remain just names to the workers in tiny villages . . . Leningrad, Moscow, Tiflis, Makhach-Kala, Erivan. . . .

As dusk fell the Don came into view, bearing queer-shaped little cargo boats on its wide breast, curving so slowly yet so strongly to the enchanting small Sea of Azov. The far lights of the city pricked the violet sky and studded the silver water with golden stars. The burden and heat of the day had been worth it for sake of this lovely sight.

Rostov station was packed. By the time I wormed my way through the crowds with the suit-case and the typewriter I looked—and felt—sadly battered. Deciding that search for the Intourist man was hopeless, I asked a porter the way to the hotel. "Just across the square, Citizeness." He pointed to a big white building ablaze with lights.

The outside was grand: the inside was bedlam. In a great bare hall hundreds of peasants screamed, laughed, chattered, and slept. Old men rested with their heads on sacks of produce, babies crawled all over the place, women rushed about with provender for their young. Everybody who wasn't asleep was chewing something, and the mingled

smells of humanity, garlic, and sunflower seeds were indescribable.

Certainly a queer hotel. Putting my luggage down in a corner I elbowed my way towards a long desk behind which three men lounged. To their delight and my confusion it transpired that I had come to the peasant's hotel by mistake. "But it is all right, Citizeness, we will telephone the Intourist hotel for a car to fetch you."

I sat down on the suit-case and shared a bottle of *piva* with a young farmer who came from Zernograd, the "City of Grain." He was very enthusiastic. "You must come to see our Workers' Settlements—we play the tennis every evening. And you will be so interested in our land development, hundreds of thousands of acres under grain on the State farms with an army of tractors to plough and sow and reap."

"Do you work on a State farm?"

"Yes, yes, I am the goat-herd. Come with me, Citizeness, and I will show you my goats."

I jumped. The idea of gallivanting all the way to Zernograd at midnight in order to inspect goats was just a little too fantastic. But the youth was arming me to my feet in a flurry of excitement. "Quickly, quickly!"

He barged his way through the hall, dragging me behind him, and opened a door in the rear. The babel of human voices behind us was as nothing beside the chorus of grunts, squawks, moos, bleats, and whinnies which greeted us as we stepped out into a large courtyard. Here, neatly penned in separate compartments, was the most astonishing variety of live stock, horses, pigs, hens, cattle, sheep, ducks, and turkeys. We cantered down a maze of alleyways between all these creatures and, "Here," said my companion proudly, "are my goats. Are they not fine specimens?"

It was practically pitch-dark and my knowledge of goats is nil, but I bent politely over the pen and said I had truly never seen such animals before.

The youth gave me a terrific thump of approval on the back. "To-morrow I will sell them in the market at a high price. Buyers flock round me because they know this herd is a wonderful strain. But every time I part with one, Citizeness, I die a little death. They are so loving, so sweet."

I groped for a handkerchief and held it to my nose. *Sweet?*

I smelt those goats all night, despite the fact that the hotel to which I was whizzed by an apologetic guide had a bathroom with boiling hot water (a rarity only appreciated after many bathless days). I soaked luxuriantly until the manager, the floorman, and the chambermaid gathered outside the door and asked anxiously if I were all right, "for these baths are not safe, Citizeness."

"Why?"

They didn't know why: they only knew they were unsafe.

Next morning at breakfast they inquired after my health and seemed astonished when I said it was excellent.

Rostov delighted me. It provided me with pots of Don caviare, delicious other foods, much-needed mosquito-nets for my bed, and a balcony from which I could gaze at Engels Street, the main thoroughfare of the town. The whole life of Rostov centred in this wide tree-lined boulevard. Here people conducted their business in little groups on the edge of the pavements, gossiped, ate and drank in its open-air cafés, greeted old friends and made new ones, wheeled their children in perambulators, hung out their washing and did their marketing. In fact, they did everything except sleep in Engels Street, and at night, when the arc-lamps glowed above the trees a colourful throng strolled along it, women in gaudy-hued shawls, men in spotless white suits, Don Cossacks in their black and red, sure once more of their welcome now that the Soviets had reinstated them after years of virtual banishment from all civic and military rights.

Gallant, swaggering men these Cossacks; the only men in this new Russia who had tradition behind them. Through the open french windows of the hotel dining-room they strode each evening to drink beer or vodka, and to eat fried eggs, and to invite me to walk with them by the Don. Their conversation was mostly of past glories and of how their ancestors had fought for the Tsars; but they were ready with praise of the new régime although once or twice I felt this was not wholly sincere. It takes more than twelve years of eclipse to down a Cossack.

Their arrogance intrigued me. The fatherly old waiter, who considered it his duty to protect me from table companions, was brushed on one side when the Cossacks appeared. "The *Angleeski* does not mind," they said; but what they really meant was that it was an honour for the *Angleeski* to converse with them and to watch them shovelling eggs into their mouths with their knives.

"You have read Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don*, Citizeness?"

"And you have seen the opera made from the book by Dzerzhinsky?"

"You know our history, of course. Everybody in the world knows about the Don Cossacks."

But they were courteous and very kind. They presented me with boxes of *Kasbek* cigarettes at five roubles for 25 (I had long since come down to smoking cheap Black Sea tobacco, rather like Algerian tobacco, at seventy-five kopeks a packet); they took me to see the magnificent new Opera House where the immensity of the foyer and the parterre, and the splendour of the auditorium made you blink; and they rowed me in boats on the river.

After Kharkov Rostov seemed a quiet, almost an old-fashioned city. If you turned to right or left off Engels Street you were immediately in a backwater lined with pleasant flat-roofed houses surrounded by leafy trees. The Park of Culture and Rest was more of a botanical garden

than an amusement place and there, among sub-tropical flowers and bushes, you might dream away the hot bright afternoons until it was time to take ferry across the river and bathe from the sandy beaches of the farther bank.

Yet Rostov was an important, thriving city beneath its quietude. The Rostselmash, the agricultural implement works which employed 40,000 people, was a town by itself from which the hum and throb of machinery sounded day and night. New houses and flats were going up every month and a grand new hotel, rather on the lines of the Moscow Hotel, was about to open. The airport was very big, and the stadium was even bigger. From the new Opera House a great flight of wide, white marble steps, similar to the steps of Odessa quay, was being made. . . . Oh, yes, Rostov was a flourishing Soviet city, but somehow the scurry and glare of Kharkov were absent.

I came to the conclusion that the Don, which had carried the city on its wide banks for so many centuries, helped it to preserve its character.

The guide in the hotel, a nice woman from Vladivostok, became quite concerned over my lack of interest in Rostov achievements. Did I not think it marvellous that the ribbed fire-proof curtain in the Opera House had been made entirely by the stage-hands and weighed some incredible number of tons? Did I not realize that the stadium would hold so many thousand? Did I not appreciate the genius of Kaganovich in running the railway straight from Rostov through Armavir to the oil refineries at Tyapse on the Black Sea coast?

I said it was all very wonderful and continued to gaze down upon Engels Street until she informed me desperately that I *must* visit the milk factory. "We will have ice-cream there," she added in the sort of voice with which you wheedle a recalcitrant child.

We went by tram, and I achieved my life's ambition—to get a seat in a Russian tram, so I arrived at the factory in

a state of elation. A woman bacteriologist showed us round, dressing us up first in gauze masks, white overalls, and rubber boots. As every floor was constantly sprayed with water we slithered like mad and I could not imagine how any of the workers ever kept their balance. I peered at pasteurizing cabinets, at huge pipes which seemed to carry the milk on a bewildering and tortuous journey round the building, at hot rooms where milk was curdled until it set solid, at cold rooms where they made ice-cream, at dressing-rooms where the workers had hot showers each morning and cold showers each evening, at enormous vats full of milk, at contraptions which sterilized, filled, and sealed hundreds of bottles per hour.

By eleven o'clock I hated the sight and smell of milk.

"And now," said the bacteriologist, "you must try our products. She sat me down at a little table and literally forced me to swallow the contents of six cartons. . . . I have never been able to face a milk-bar since.

"You come from England?" she asked. "I dislike the English very much. My first husband was an Englishman and I had to divorce him."

She looked so fierce that I wondered nervously if she had tampered with any of the cartons.

"I am very sorry, but you cannot judge all Englishmen by one bad specimen."

She shrugged. "They are all the same, very dishonest people. But now I am happy; my second husband is Russian."

"That is good, Citizeness. Is he a doctor, too?"

"Oh, no, he is a bus driver."

I subsided. This young woman was a little too much for me.

Walking back to the tram the guide said: "Now you have seen the milk factory I will take you to the hospital this afternoon, and this evening we might go to the Rostselmash."

Most basely I deserted her by hiring a Ford at vast cost

and jolting down to the Sea of Azov, where I spent a blissful afternoon sun-bathing on the beach. It was bad of me, and I was missing much useful knowledge of Soviet industry; but it was so much nicer to sit in the hot sun, and look at beauty and talk lazily to individuals than to plod round factories and listen to the propaganda which bored me but entranced the workers.

It was in Rostov that I heard news of a young friend who had visited the city a few weeks previously. "We had a great English writer here," they said.

I pricked up my ears and asked the name.

"You know him? He did not like the Soviets at all. He complained about the price of developing photographs, and he sent off a very long telegram to England and then said he would not pay for it."

It seemed a pity to have journeyed all the way to Rostov without discovering that telegrams were prohibitive unless you limited yourself to three words and an address, but I explained that he was a very young and clever man who had ideas above money.

"No," they said flatly. "He was a capitalist."

I grinned. The last time I had seen the young man he had worn a red tie and talked at length about the proletariat . . . but that, of course, was before his Russian visit.

VII

I left Rostov sadly, in the middle of a violent thunderstorm. Torrential rain beat down upon my beloved Engels Street as we drove to the station, and three Cossacks, who had come to see me off with presents of cigarettes and fruit, arrived with their black robes clinging soddenly to their bodies. The train was scheduled for 9.30 p.m., but as there was no sign of it by 10.30 we adjourned to the buffet and drank a very fizzy pink concoction optimistically called raspberry cordial. "One of the trains got lost a little while

ago," said a Cossack gravely. "It never reached Rostov at all."

"And there is a train," said another, "which leaves Kiev every day and only gets here three times a week."

I was slightly apprehensive about these jokes. What would my family do if mamma was lost in a ghost train in the North Caucasus? Besides, it would be such a difficult end to explain away to elderly relatives. "*Where* did you say your mother died, dear?" "Oh, in a Russian train." "You mean in an accident?" "Not exactly; the train just disappeared." "But, my dear, trains don't disappear." "Russian ones do. . . ." Oh, dear, the catechism might go on for weeks. . . .

"Mineralny Vody," shouted a voice through the loud-speaker.

The train was a mere bagatelle of two hours late.

The Cossacks yelled good-byes: "Come back next year," they cried. "Better still, take a job in Rostov and don't go back to England at all."

There were two Red Army officers in my compartment, one an alert little man most interested in the English Army; the other a big, shambling creature who sat nursing the worst gumboil I had ever seen. Above his moans we discussed the Grenadier Guards, the Household Cavalry, and the Lancers, and I drew extremely feeble sketches of their various uniforms in a note-book.

"Such a waste of money," said the little man.

"I don't think so at all. Soldiers ought to look grand and warlike."

He shook his head. "Their appearance makes no difference to their fighting powers. Look at us?"

I refrained from saying that so far nobody had seen the Red Army in action, and that anyway they might keep their tunics buttoned and their caps straight.

"Oh, oh, oh!" groaned the man with the gumboil. "I shall go mad with the pain."

I told him to stop swallowing hot tea and suggested a towel wrung out in cold water and applied to the face. There was no cold water, so I saturated the towel in Narzan, swathed it about his head and secured it with a safety-pin. He looked oddly like a coal-black mammy but said it relieved him. Sprawled out on my lower bunk he fell asleep.

His friend regarded him with an experienced eye. "He will wake up soon. We had better get some rest while we can."

I climbed the ladder to the upper bunk and settled down. Presently I was awakened by mutterings and curses from beneath. The gumboil was worse, *much worse*, and something must be done at once. I crawled down again to find the sufferer brandishing a rusty penknife and imploring his friend to lance his gum.

"Don't be silly: you can't do that. You'll get blood-poisoning."

"Citizeness, I do not care if I die!"

The friend began a long explanation of how he ought to have seen the doctor before he left Kharkov, and how angry the Commandant at Batalpashinsk would be when he arrived in this condition. I fetched my little box of first-aids to beauty and accident and produced a bottle of Pond's Extract. "This is cooling. Pat it on to your face with cotton-wool."

Not a bit of it. He seized the box and ferreted in it with extremely dirty fingers. Triumphantly he held up a jar of vanishing cream. "Ha, this is what I want!" He proceeded to scoop the cream out with his penknife and to smear it all over his head.

We giggled; then I pulled myself together. "If you open your mouth I'll paint it with iodine."

Immediately he was suspicious. I showed him the bottle and the little brush, but the lettering on the former conveyed nothing to him and I did not know the Russian for

iodine. Finally, his friend seized his lower jaw and pulled it open while I anointed his gum. . . .

There was no more sleep for any of us. The groans and curses grew in intensity and the sufferer was convinced that I had made matters worse. He lay down on the bunk, kicked his legs and behaved like a spoilt child of five. We sat cross-legged on the other bunk and played a Russian version of halfpenny nap for kopeks through the long, hot night, until the dawn light showed silvery bands at the sides of the blinds. The little man twitched the blind next him aside and beckoned to me. Far away to the south, the first rays of the sun tinting their snowy sides with rose, were the Caucasus, a range of unearthly beauty which seemed to rise from the pearly clouds that rested low on the plain. To the east, solitary and majestic, towered the twin peaks of Elbrus.

CHAPTER IV
THE FLOWERS OF LIFE

I

THE station at Mineralny Vody (Mineral Waters) resembled a public park. The platforms had flower-beds gay with zinnias, geums, and petunias; arches of roses decorated the approaches to the buffet, the Intourist kiosk, the newspaper, fruit, and ice-cream booths . . . even the alleyways leading to the lavatories were fragrant with white La France roses. The morning air was clear, sparkling, heady, blown straight from the snow-capped Caucasus. The hill folk walked to and fro with long, swinging strides and the officials shed their bureaucratic garments.

Sitting on a bench sniffing that glorious air, surrounded by colour and scent of blossom, wrapped about in a cocoon of golden sunshine, I forgot my love for Moscow, my delight in Rostov, the awed admiration I held for Kharkov. I was in the mountains: nothing else mattered.

The Intourist man strolled up, hands in pockets. "There is a breakdown on the side-line to Kislovodsk. They are electrifying it, you know." He sighed deeply, "There is always trouble when they electrify things."

I waved electrification to one side. The bare idea of such a modern and man-made development in the middle of this beauty offended me. "How late will the train be?"

He straightened and eyed me warily. "Oh, about twenty-three hours and fifty minutes." Then he relaxed again, having vindicated Russian railways. To a foreigner a train must never be *twenty-four* hours late: it must be "twenty-three hours and fifty minutes" because the time sounded so much less.

Not that I minded: I had had enough of trains, I liked the

look of Mineralny Vody, and I had grown too Russian to bother about the passage of time. I did manage one question: "Where do I sleep?" and upon being assured that "the hotel is good, Citizeness, it has the taps in all the bedrooms," I relapsed into dreaming until a rather urgent pang of hunger reminded me I had not eaten since leaving Rostov.

In the buffet they gave me tea, a frothy omelet, and much the best butter I had tasted in Russia to spread on my black bread. I bought a poke of cherries at the stall and wandered along the station to a large field which was encircled by wire-netting. Here the children of travellers played with the children of Mineralny Vody, and as I watched them I knew that anybody who undertook an odyssey, laughing or otherwise, through Soviet Russia, found ultimate haven with these little creatures. I knew, too, that the time had come to disprove all the absurd tales of the Soviets' attitude towards the young.

The prevalent idea in Europe was that the Soviet State was an ogre who tore infants from their mothers' bosoms with a ferocity unparalleled in human history. Having accomplished this dastardly business the State then took pains to ensure that no form of family life was countenanced. Parents never saw their children: children forgot their parents: the youth of Russia was an army of State-owned robots who were ignorant of affection and kindness. . . . Not once but many times in books, newspapers, and conversations had I gathered these impressions.

Then I came to Soviet Russia and found that the children were called "The Flowers of Life."

Surely no other nation ever invented such a beautiful name?

"They are our future," Russians told me. "They are the reason we struggle for security, because the whole fate of the Soviet Union lies in their tiny hands. They are the citizens of to-morrow, the forerunners of Russia's peaceful greatness. Besides," they added simply, "we love them so."

And the farther I journeyed through Russia the more I realized the truth of that last remark. From several months before its birth until it reached the age of sixteen, the Russian child was held safely, tightly, in an enchanted world where harm could not reach it.

The mothers of Russia were released from work for the last few months before their children were born, and from the earliest signs of pregnancy their health was treated by watchful doctors. Even in remote districts where living conditions were still primitive to a degree, medical service reached a high standard. Birth took place in clean, efficient hospitals, and thereafter mothers took their babies for weekly visits to clinics so that any hint of weakness might be counteracted at once. Until the children were nine months old their mothers were given freedom in which to tend and feed them; after that time those who were in full-time employment left their babies in crèches during their seven-hour day and fetched them home at the end of it.

By the time they were three years old these young citizens had developed a certain philosophy of living. The crèche was the place where you romped with lots of small boys and girls, and ate large meals, and had the enchanting stories of Tchoukovsky¹ read to you. The home was the place where your father sang and joked with you and your mother sympathized over childish troubles and ailments. Both places were good: the crèche held your mind and your body, the home held your heart.

Watching Russian children I was always conscious of this division of loyalties and it seemed to me an excellent thing. It gave the children balance and ensured a far better relationship between parent and child than was usual in other countries. The mothers, although they might be tired at the end of their working-day, knew a sense of keen excitement when they fetched little Serge, or Yosif, or Simeon from the crèche that they never would have known had they

¹ A famous Russian poet who writes for children.

been tumbling over the children all day while trying to do housework. The fathers took a very real interest in their progeny, played games with them, studied with them, took them to the parks or the theatres in the evenings. As for the children themselves, they adored their parents in a whole-hearted manner which bore out a contention I had long held—that the parent is the worst possible person to be with the child constantly.

Nursery-school was a step forward. Here the children began to read, write, and draw, and I developed an intense admiration for the methods used by their teachers. In large airy rooms (or outdoors in hot weather) the children learnt their letters from gaily painted pictures, worked with their hands in various ways, learnt to count, drew leaves and flowers, did embroidery and weaving. The fact that the features of Lenin and Stalin were worked into samplers, table-mats, even blouses, emphasized the insistence laid on the importance of the State, but somehow this did not worry me—in Russia. Propaganda was rife in all schools, but it lacked the strident harshness of Mussolini's Fascist campaign, and the shrill hysteria of the Führer's Nazi speeches; rather was it a credo sung softly, continuously, which inspired its listeners to become good citizens without depriving them of their individuality.

For Russian children were fiercely individual. Each one saw himself another Molotov, another Kaganovich, a famous engineer, an ace pilot, an Arctic explorer. Their parents might be Commissars or field workers, Stakhanovites or cobblers, it made no least difference to the children's chances in life. Spread before them on a platter were all the educational advantages of the Soviet Union . . . and the ability to clear that platter lay within their own small brains.

Occasionally I got a jolt when some tiny creature talked to me seriously about the welfare of the State or the future of the gold industry, and was reminded of parrots, but when

I followed these embryo citizens through their day I found that politics were forgotten when it came to football or stool-ball or dancing.

Strong-limbed, brown and laughing, young Russia enjoyed a physical fitness unknown to any of their predecessors. Some of the older children, born of tired, starved parents during the famine years, had required much attention from doctors before attaining perfect health, but their growing bodies had responded to treatment and a children's gymnastic or swimming display was something worth watching.

Two examples of childhood particularly stayed in my mind. The first was the four-year-old son of one of those who used to be known as "the children of the Terror," a hungry, ragged, filthy creature without home who had lurked in the Moscow sewers and only emerged at night to thief and wound . . . very possibly to kill. Revolution had swept away his people and he had sunk a good deal lower than the animals. When the Government won full control over the city and rounded up him and his fellows, they were sent to a House of Correction in the country where they were fed, clothed, and taught a trade. This particular boy reacted to kindness and discipline. (Some of his fellows did not: riddled with disease and perverted beyond belief they have passed completely from the Russian scene. Nobody gives any explanation for their disappearance but one surmises they were shot, an end not so cruel as the travesty of life such poor, warped beings would have had to endure.)

But this boy, together with several others, grew into a serious-minded young man with a tremendous interest in medicine. He went to Moscow University, took his degree, obtained a post as house surgeon in a big hospital. He married a sweet and very simple girl from Gorki, and when I met him he was making amazing strides in his profession. "And my son," he told me, "will have everything I did not have."

With such a heritage one would have imagined that the

son would be a nasty, furtive small child minus any degree of sensibility. Most strangely, he was a charming, laughing little thing who adored his father. From the horror of the Moscow sewers had sprung a flower that blossomed more sweetly than did the acacias that waved their fronds above the Black Sea coast: from the years which had eaten away all goodness from living had burgeoned a desire to know all happiness through a child. This father, who had suffered unspeakable things, wanted security for his boy, and I have never seen anybody work quite so hard to achieve it. Every evening he played with him, discussed the hundred little happenings of his day, suggested to him all sorts of ways in which to surmount small difficulties. The atmosphere of his home was tranquil, assured. Only when you looked into the father's eyes did you see mirrored there the memory of his own appalling childhood.

I said to him: "You, too, have a door in your mind?"

"Yes, but try as I will I cannot quite close it. Always I see my other self, that skulking rat who committed many crimes, that creature from whom my son would fly in terror if he ever met him—but I hope he will never know that the father he loves was once so vile."

I left the two of them turning somersaults on the grass and hoped passionately that the father would be able to retain that which he wanted so much for his son—safety.

The second child who specially intrigued me was a tiny girl whom I watched that morning in Mineralny Vody. Her home was in a remote Caucasian village, and she was going with her mother to Kislovodsk, where the latter would have Narzan baths to cure a tired heart. When I first saw her she was sitting cross-legged on the ground holding her mouth wide open like a baby bird for the cherries which a small Uzbek boy was gravely popping into it, while a circle of young admirers looked on.

Presently she stood up, shook out her bunchy red skirt and announced: "I want to dance."

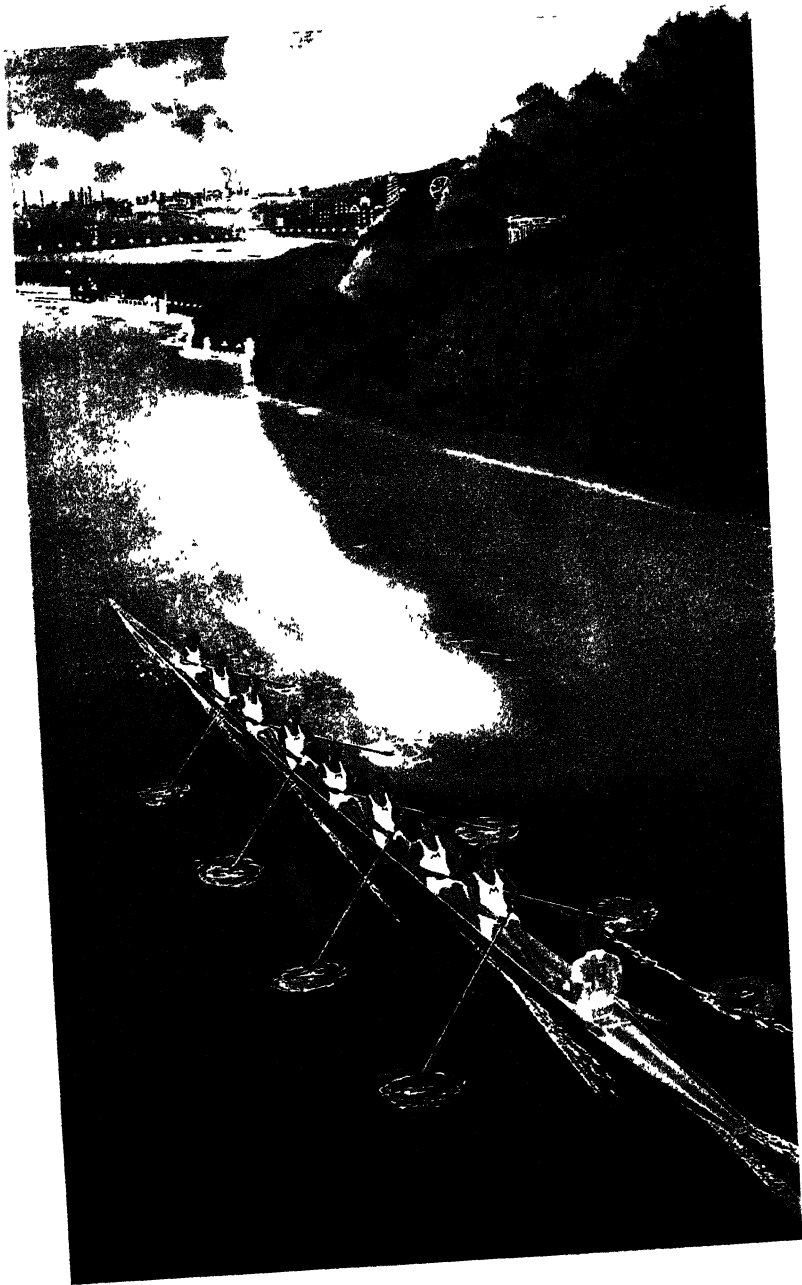
Three swains rushed off in search of the accordion player (there is always an accordion player handy in Russia) and returned with a jolly young peasant who seated himself on an upturned box and struck up a lively tune. The children—there must have been over a hundred of them—formed a ring round him and clapped their hands in time to the music while the little girl gave them a solo. How that child could dance! With the effortless ease of a prima ballerina she went through the complicated movements of a Caucasian dance, her skirt a scarlet balloon above her twinkling bare brown legs, her black hair gleaming in the sunshine, her little pointed face alight with happiness.

In her was incarnate the spirit of new Russia.

All day I watched those Russian children playing in that field. They were gathered from all parts of the vast Union . . . Turks, Uzbeks, Jews, Tatars, Mongols, Kurds, Armenians, but they played like one family, and when a child of a mountain tribe could not understand another from Ukraine they resorted to mime and got along famously. There was no friction: no dissent. The air was full of laughter and the grown-ups squatted contentedly on their bundles chewing sunflower seeds and enjoying the children's fun. When twilight came the mothers fetched the inevitable pannikins of hot water from the buffet, made little fires with twigs and cooked savoury stews heavily flavoured with *Petroushka*, the sweet herb which all Russians adore.

Peace stole slowly across the field. The children, worn out with play and soothed by the evening meal, curled up and went to sleep on the queerest assortment of mattresses, blankets, coats, and pillows—for when the Russian peasant travels he takes with him all his household goods. One man even had a handsome four-poster bed which took him a full three hours to erect and in which he and his wife slept peacefully at one end while their twins of two years old were safely tucked in at the other.

To-morrow might bring further breakdowns on the



THE FLOWERS OF LIFE

railway, more long waits for trains which had to lumber across thousands of miles of country before reaching Mineralny Vody. . . . But to-morrow was also a day. Full of sun and sweet mountain air the travellers and their children slept.

II

And in my clean little hotel bedroom I thought about these Flowers of Life. Strong and courageous, surrounded by kindness, they would move towards maturity and the new life that pulsed through this extraordinary land of Soviet Russia. They would go from nursery-school to ordinary school, where they would learn French, German, or English in addition to Russian (and possibly in addition to their own language as well, for the great majority of the races in the Union have their own alphabets, their own literature, which are preserved although all must now learn Russian as their common language); where they would quickly develop a knowledge of mathematics, science, and geography; where they would learn to appreciate painting, sculpture; and music; where they would dance and sing, do physical exercises and play team-games. In the summer-time—for Russian schools close during the hottest months—they would go to Pioneer camps in the Urals, the Ukraine, the Caucasus, or the Crimea where they might swim and climb and hunt, and where their bodies might develop and their eager young minds find rest.

There had been a youth parade in Moscow, line after line of upright, white-clad figures marching proudly before the leaders of the Government. I had not seen one poor physical specimen among them. There had been the golden athletes in Kharkov stadium, the groups of child hikers in the Ukraine, the boys and girls who gambolled like porpoises in the Moscow River and the Don. . . . I remembered those sights and wondered if any other nation in the world was doing so much for its youth. I wondered, too, if most

visitors to U.S.S.R. were purblind that they did not see the beauty of the Flowers of Life. . . .

Next morning the Intourist man said to me: "There is an English-speaking gentleman in the kiosk to whom I cannot explain that he has three hours to wait. Will you please interpret for me?"

I went with a bad grace. Sitting on the extreme edge of a bench was a bespectacled Chinese in a dark suit. Over one shoulder a camera-case was slung, over the other a binocular case. In his hand was a sheaf of papers.

"Your train to Rostov is three hours late."

He scowled at me. "The Intourist officials at Stalingrad assured me that the train left here punctually at nine a.m. I object most strongly to this deplorable lack of any time sense. I have come from Moscow to Gorki and from thence down the Volga and never once has a train, an omnibus, a steamer, or a meal been up to time. In fifteen days"—here he referred to his papers—"I calculate I have wasted no fewer than thirty-seven hours. It is disgraceful. Will you have the politeness to tell me what I can do in this benighted place for three hours?"

"Come and see the children."

"Ah," his face brightened. "There is an important educational establishment?"

"No, just lots of children in a field."

"I do not understand. What is there of interest in a lot of children in a field? What I require is *pre*-cise information about the workings of the Soviet States."

I lost patience with the man. "Nothing is *pre*-cise in Russia. But if you watch the children playing you will learn far more about Soviet education than if you prowled through fifty schools."

He drew himself up. "I am a Professor of Mathematics in Pekin. I have just taken an added and excellent degree in Berlin University. A person of my intellect cannot fritter away energy in watching mere children."

I left him still perched on the edge of the bench, still consulting the statistics he had laboriously written down concerning the number of tractors turned out weekly from the Stalingrad works, and the number of bricks used in the building of the City Soviet in Kazan, and the capacity of kilowatts in the hydro-electric stations which will be reared on the new Zhiguli dam, still arguing hopelessly in his pedantic English with officials who smiled, shrugged, and drifted away. A member of the oldest civilization in the world, he gazed upon the youngest civilization and disapproved every least thing about it. Back in Pekin he would study his figures and imagine that he knew all there was to know about the Soviets, but because of his dreary intellectual snobbery he would remain completely ignorant of the most important people in the Union—the children.

III

The field was waking to the new day. Little boys ducked each others' heads in pails of water, a small girl of seven solemnly washed her doll's clothes and hung them out on a string to dry, a group of older girls played "tig," and various small fry sat under the trees chewing hunks of black bread. Thrilled by a gift of pencils (I took three dozen of these to Russia and had none left by the time I reached Tiflis) half a dozen children crowded round me and demanded to know about England.

"Why do you have a King?"

"Because our Kings are very good men and our people are fond of them."

This statement took a lot of swallowing. To young Russia the word "Tsar" is a synonym for the devil. "No kings are good," they told me flatly.

I told them about George V and all he had done for England, about his simplicity, his modesty, and his tremendous interest in his Empire. Gradually they grew more

interested and began to ask enormously intelligent questions; not the "Does your King wear a golden crown?" sort, but questions which showed they had a real desire to find out how other countries were governed.

Presently an older boy stepped forward: "Are you a capitalist?"

"No, I work for my living just as your father and mother do."

"Are you a Stakhanovite?"

"No, I read manuscripts for a publisher and sometimes write books of my own."

He squeezed my hand excitedly. "That is what I want to do when I'm grown up. Our Stalin says writers are the engineers of the mind."

A serious girl of about fourteen asked: "Does everybody work in England?"

I tried to explain the entirely different social system with some degree of success, but when I came to discussion of the unemployment problem I was beat. "We do not understand: what is unemployment?" Brought up in a land where there was more than enough work they simply could not visualize a country where there was not enough work to go round.

"One of our greatest proverbs," said the serious girl, "is 'One must work to live.'"

I was growing rather hot and bothered when the accordion player made his appearance, and the children flocked round him demanding different tunes. For the moment nimble brains gave way to jigging feet. . . . Dancing under the summer sun these little creatures forgot their curiosity concerning other lands; remembered only that they were joyous, care-free, the Flowers of Life.

CHAPTER V

THE MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON

I

THE little wooden train which chuffed the fifty-odd miles to Kislovodsk was a sort of remote cousin to a tram-car—and about as crowded. But here there was none of the pushing and fighting which characterized journeys in city trams. These were local travellers, going from village to village doing their marketing, and every one knew every one else. Women with great baskets of fruit and vegetables appeared at the side of the track and swung themselves aboard; nobody seeming to mind the fact that this necessitated the train stopping every other minute. Parties of children, going to spend their Rest Day at Kislovodsk, ran from coach to coach across swaying platforms with a fine disregard for life and limb. Caucasians with long, waisted black coats, cartridge-cases studding their chests, and high astrakhan caps, tossed rifles into the racks with airy ease and talked horses with each other. In a confusing babel of dialects my ear caught the unmistakable sound of German, and I looked round to see where it came from. Two large, stolid, and obviously Saxon women, dressed in print frocks and snowy kerchiefs and holding baskets of groceries on their knees, were the speakers. I blinked: these were never tourists?

A Kuban Cossack leaned forward and tapped my arm. "They come from the German village. I will show you when we pass it. They settled there about a hundred and fifty years ago, built themselves little German houses, started to farm part of the valley in the German way. Until the Soviet régime they refused even to have speech with the Russians, although only a few yards separated them from a

Russian village. They intermarried among themselves, taught their own children, brought them up in the Lutheran faith. But now they have made friends with the Russians and are good Soviet citizens and send their children to the State schools. It is only among themselves that they still speak German."

"But how did they come here in the first place?"

"Nobody knows. There is an English village, too, farther up in the mountains. Perhaps they were gypsies!"

There was nothing of the gipsy about those Saxon women. Moving across the aisle I asked one of them if she knew the history of her community. No, she did not know. Yes, it was queer that Germans should have travelled so far from home to settle in such a remote place. No, they did not want to go back to Germany, they were quite happy where they were.

I thought that the speech might still be German and the children still good little Lutherans, but the whole mental outlook had become Russian. During my stay in the mountains I asked many people for the history of that German village, but nobody could answer me; nor was I any more successful in my inquiries about the English settlement to which I later paid a visit. Here, however, were a mere handful of semi-Romany folk, who talked a patois impossible to understand and who were so inbred that they were practically all cretins. But that steadfast little German community in the North Caucasus still intrigues me.

The train meandered on through the foothills. Little lakes shone like sapphires, herds of wild horses galloped off at the sound of the engine, far away on a rugged cliff a Caucasian horseman appeared silhouetted against the skyline, immobile in his long coat. Then the valley broadened and lush green meadows starred with orchises, poppies, and cornflowers spread themselves peaceably on either side of a mountain river, and tiny villages sat snugly behind protecting belts of trees.

"The valley of Delight," said the Kuban Cossack. "And that last village was Pyatigorsk, where they have the—the—how do you say . . .?" He went through a pantomime of riding and I said brightly, "Horse fair?"

"No, no!"

"A market for horses then?"

"No. Ah, I have it, the *Hyppolyte*!"

It was my turn to look mystified. After ten minutes' concentrated argument I discovered there was a race-track at Pyatigorsk, and that horse-racing was a favourite sport of the hill folk.

The Cossack was an engineer working on the electrification of the Kislovodsk railway, so I ventured to ask about yesterday's breakdown. "Ah, I can see you do not know Kislovodsk! Every few days at this season we have terrific thunderstorms which sweep down from the mountains to flood the pits at the station and carry pieces of the line away. It is very difficult to combat nature—but we shall triumph, we shall triumph!"

I couldn't quite make out how he proposed to protect his precious railway track from the elements, but took his word that in a year's time electric trains would rush to and from Mineralny Vody at lightning speed. "See our pylons," he waved proudly, "are they not exquisite?"

"I'm sorry, but I think they're hideous, and they ruin the view."

"Pah! What does that matter? Do you know that even in the remote villages—some of them two hundred miles from the railway—there is electric light? Is that not wonderful?"

I supposed it was; but it still hurt me to see the Caucasus decorated with pylons.

But the Cossack was inexhaustible. He had with him his seven children, the eldest sixteen, the youngest seven, all of them dressed in white, and he was taking them to Kislovodsk for the day. He had also collected several other children

whose parents were busy. A little round ball of a man in a white duck suit, he bounced up and down on the seat talking nineteen to the dozen.

"My wife is not with us; she is at home in Mineralny Vody because she has so much washing to do in the summer-time and she cannot find a servant. These girls want too much money nowadays, and they dislike hard work. . . ."

(Somewhere in my mind stirred memories of very similar conversations in a Surrey village.) "But surely one does not have servants in the Soviet Union?"

"And why not, pray? I earn three thousand roubles a month and can afford to give a girl a good home and the best food. There is surely nothing derogatory about domestic service?"

"Not in the least. I just thought that in a classless country . . ." My voice tailed off. The enigma of Russian class-distinction was insoluble. One moment you would hear a hundred rouble a month worker say, "A match, if you please, Comrade," to a Commissar, and the next you would realize desperately that instead of the three classes of England, there were six in the Soviet Union.

"I tell you what, Citizeness, you will spend the day with us in Kislovodsk. Then I can show you the countryside. We are meeting a friend of mine, an engineer from Turkestan who has a weak heart and is staying at a sanatorium. Of course you know the Narzan baths are so good for heart trouble!"

In my innocence I was grateful to the Cossack for his invitation. I knew nobody in Kislovodsk, and it was always much more entertaining to see a place in company with one familiar with it. "But first," I said firmly, "I must take my baggage to the Grand Hotel."

"Yes, yes, we will carry it for you. There is no traffic allowed in Pjatachek, the main street. Wait until you see it—beautiful, beautiful! But now I must tell you about my children. Ivan here is going to join the Red Army, the

Air Force; Nikolai is going to be an engineer, and so is Dmitri; Sophy is to study architecture; Natasha, music; Alexandrina, medicine. As for my little Vladimir Ilyich," he thumped the seven-year-old on the back, "well, why do you think we named him after our great Lenin? When he was born, Citizeness, he had a head of such magnitude, a forehead of such prominence, that my wife and I knew at once that he would grow up to follow in Vladimir Ilyich's footsteps."

I looked with interest at this future dictator of all the Russias. He seemed to have grown into his head, so to speak, and I could see no visible signs of budding genius, but he was a nice child with a friendly grin. "Pappy," he said, "will we have strawberries for dinner?"

But Pappy's attention was concentrated on my typewriter. "Ivan, you carry that and I will take the Citizeness's case and Nikolai and Sophy can bring the biscuits and the blanket. In three more minutes we shall be in Kislovodsk."

I was still wondering what this family could want with a red plush blanket on a grilling summer day, when Pappy leapt from his seat, seized my case, collected his brood about him with stentorian shouts and hustled to the end of the coach. "Come along, come along!"

The children cantered after him. I brought up the rear and found myself precipitated into confusion. Hillmen with goats and sheep, women with loads of produce, people of all shapes and sizes in every variety of costume stood in a solid mass on the platform and screamed at the pitch of their voices. In the park behind the station a band played *South American Joe*; in the park in front of the station the Moscow Symphony Orchestra was contending valiantly with a Liszt Rhapsody: from the loud-speaker above the booking-hall, a bass voice boomed that the Kislovodsk-Sochi Black Sea de Luxe Express would leave "in a few minutes."

I lost Pappy and his army of children: but I found Pjatachek. Its gradient was about one in four, its shops,

cafés, and terraces gay with bougainvillea, clematis, wisteria, and acacia, its surface literally hidden by the strolling, laughing crowds, its pot-holes worse than any in Moscow and its whole atmosphere one of holiday. I had seen Rest Days in the cities, but so far I had not seen Soviet Russia really at play, and the sight was breath-taking. . . . Also I had to find Pappy because he had all my belongings, so I pounded down Pjatachek with a vigour which upset the Russians very much indeed. One Caucasian could bear it no longer: "Citizeness, are you in trouble?"

"No Comrade, but I want to find the Grand Hotel."

"It is only at the bottom of the hill. It will not run away."

I thought grimly that it was Pappy who might do the running and plunged on.

Pappy and the children had taken up a strategic position in the hall of the hotel, and while the former explained to the reception clerk, with a wealth of gesture, that the fool *Angleeski* had lost herself and was probably now whirling towards the Black Sea in the de Luxe Express, the latter were effectively blocking all entrance to and exit from the hotel, much to the annoyance of its patrons. When I struggled past them, hot, dusty, and dishevelled, I was greeted with a rapture strangely different from the remarks I had overheard while trying to storm the barricade of little Cossacks.

"Is not that splendid?" beamed Pappy. "I have had your baggage sent up to your room. Now shall we start on our tour of Kislovodsk?"

"Pappy," demanded the infant Lenin, "can we have some strawberries first?"

I was so pleased with him that I gave him three roubles. "Yes, of course you can. Then I shall change my clothes and meet you here in an hour's time."

Pappy looked dubious. "It is not good for the stomach to eat between meals, and it is eleven o'clock already."

Luckily, Vladimir Ilyich won the day. As the family trailed out I turned to the clerk: "Please, may I have a bath?"

"Narzan?"

"No, a *bath*."

He grinned vacuously, "Narzan?"

The man was a half-wit.

"B—A—T—H."

"Yes, yes." He skipped round the counter, took me by the arm and led me across the street to an imposing edifice that looked like a mosque, but was surmounted by a square and extremely western clock tower. Ushering me into a long, tiled corridor he beckoned to a man in a white coat who bowed, smiled, and threw open a door. At first I was overcome by clouds of steam which smelt strongly of carbolic; then, blinking and coughing, I espied a very fat woman lying full length in an enormous bath.

"Narzan!" said the man in the white coat. "Excellent for weak hearts. See the bubbles that form all over the body."

I had seldom felt more embarrassed, but the bather smiled and nodded, "Half an hour I stay here: the cure is wonderful."

The man in the white coat whipped out a stethoscope. "If you will have the goodness to let me sound you, Citizeness?"

I submitted to his examination. Why, oh, why had I not remembered that one not only drank but bathed in Narzan in Kislovodsk?

The doctor shook his head solemnly. "I regret, Citizeness, your heart is very strong. You have no need of Narzan. I would let you have a bath for the experience with pleasure, but we are already short of baths for real sufferers. Perhaps you would like to see round our establishment?"

In a faint voice I murmured I had an engagement, and escaped after a long harangue in which I was told how the

Narzan was piped up to the great white sanatoria which perched on the hill-sides all round the town, how the Narzan Gallery—where the wells bubbled up in the centre of an arcade full of palms and mural paintings—was 2,454 feet above sea-level, how the new baths now being built would accommodate one hundred patients an hour. . . .

When I met Pappy and his brood I was still bathless. The strong had to go dirty in Kislovodsk.

The mountain air had gone to Pappy's head. "We will go to the Temple of Air," he shouted, "and then to the Castle of Love and Intrigue." He charged up Pjatachek while we trailed behind.

Then we really began to climb. Cliff paths led dizzily round precipices, and I quickly came to the conclusion that the Cossack family and their small friends were directly descended from chamois. "We will meet my friend," said Pappy, "at the Red Stone Square—you will see Elbrus from there."

That thought revived me. Claspings Vladimir Ilyich's sticky paw I struggled on. The other children were tireless, springing from rock to rock, playing hide and seek behind the cliffs, rolling on the close mountain turf, picking Alpine plants . . . and drinking Narzan. At every corner on that hill-path was a Narzan kiosk and at every kiosk we stopped for glasses of the stuff, an expensive hobby since Pappy and I took turns in paying, and the cost was twenty kopeks a glass. The expense, however, was as nothing compared to my feelings after six Narzans. I was simply a balloon filled with carbonic acid gas, and I had to take the greatest care to keep my wavering feet on the ground lest the breeze wafted me over the intervening peaks to Mount Bermamyt.

Pappy talked continuously. He showed me the sanatorium for the miners, the sanatorium for the scientific workers, and the sanatorium for the railwaymen. He told me the height of every peak in the main Caucasian range and the depth of the Kuma, Terek, and Kura rivers. He

explained exactly how the electrification of the railway was planned, how much it had cost, what difficulties they had had to contend with. He gave me the entire history of Kislovodsk and he indulged in a paean of praise of Cossacks. His father had been a well-to-do *kulak* with rich lands and a prosperous farm. He was perfectly willing to recognize the Soviets, but was it right for them to deprive him of the property which had been in his family for many generations and to reduce him to the level of an ordinary worker? No, a thousand times, no! Their harsh treatment had broken the father's heart, and he had retired to the hills to die.

I managed to gasp out, "Then why did you call your son after Lenin?"

"Ah, that is different. Times have changed and I, a young man, fully realize the blessings the Soviets have given my children. But those good lands, you know, those lands."

Somehow I didn't feel that Pappy was a good citizen. He wanted to have his cake and eat it.

The Red Stone Square was lovely; huge sandstone cliffs rising jagged against a deep, blue sky. Crawling on all fours to the top I lay panting on my stomach, and had my reward in sight of Elbrus's twin peaks rising, snowy and shimmering, from the puff-ball clouds which covered the lesser mountains. I forgot the Cossacks and the sanatoria and the Narzan; I only knew that I could lie on the warm red stone for ever and a day watching this beauty.

Behind me sounded Pappy's high-pitched voice, "Elbrus is the highest mountain in Europe; 18,470 feet."

As if that mattered!

The friend was a pleasant, tired-looking man who was resting in the scientific workers' sanatorium. He spoke softly in a slow drawl which fell sweetly on the ear after Pappy's gabble, and asked many questions about Dresden, where he had taken an engineering degree before the War. While the Cossacks pranced on ahead to the Grey Stone cliffs, he and I meandered behind and he told me about

Turkestan, about the Pamirs, about the Arctic tundra and the Siberian steppes. "I have not been in European Russia for ten years," he said, "but the heart grows weary of climatic rigours." Suddenly he nudged me, "See, Kaganovich, his wife and his daughters. His wife is very delicate and she is doing a cure here."

Towards us, down the steep path, the man who had built the vast Russian railway system out of chaos came stepping delicately, a prim, square little figure in a tussore suit. He walked slightly ahead of his womenfolk, as befitted the second man in Russia, and his black eyes looked keenly out of his dark Jewish face. "How d'you do, Comrade," he greeted my companion, and shook him by the hand. "We have been to the Temple of Air; it is fine up there."

We chatted for a few minutes. The conversation was banal, because Kaganovich was on holiday and had forgotten his work for the moment, but I received an impression of a tremendously forceful personality. That man had drive, power, magnetism . . . all the qualities which go to make up that rare bird, genius.

Plodding on up the hill-side, I said to the engineer: "You have a weak heart; Mme Kaganovich has a weak heart; yet you climb up and down appalling slopes at an altitude of somewhere near 3,000 feet. Do you think that is right?"

He looked astonished. "Why not? Our doctors examine us each morning and tell us what we may or may not do."

I said no more, but thought that the combination of Narzan with the Russian power of endurance must be highly successful.

Everybody, except myself, had more Narzan at the Grey Stone cliffs. I did a clamber on my own up their rocky sides and looked down on the town which lay far beneath me, clusters of white buildings set in the green cup formed by the surrounding mountains. Veiled in a faint blue haze it was a fairy place, and I felt glad that it had been turned into a paradise for tired workers who had spent their

energies in starting Soviet Russia on her upward journey. Then some carving on a stone behind me caught my eye, and I read with astonishment the German words, *Austria: the Day! To the glorious memory of all who lost their lives fighting against Imperial Russia in 1915: we will avenge them!*"

Beckoning to Pappy, I asked him who had carved such words upon a Caucasian rock. He did not know, and he did not think it particularly interesting. His friend suggested mildly that perhaps some tourist had done so.

I said: "Precious few foreign tourists come to Kislovodsk. And the man who carved this had proper tools and spent at least a week over the job."

They shrugged—and drank some more Narzan.

It was just another little Russian mystery which would never be solved.

The Temple of Air was a wide, pillared building on a hill-top. From it one could see not only Elbrus, but the whole main range of the Caucasus towering gloriously from east to south. I said to the engineer, "I must go there—quickly. I shan't be happy until I get right among those mountains."

He nodded: "I know a very good guide who will take you. He works for Intourist, so you can make all arrangements at your hotel. I agree with you; when you see the Caucasus you know that you have fulfilled some subconscious quest which has long been important. I have seen many other mountains, your Alps in Europe, our own Pamirs, the stupendous Himalayas . . . but to look on the Caucasus again means an end of longing. They are different to all other ranges, more fantastic, more remote. We call them the *Mountains of the Moon*."

Pappy was growing restive. "Come along, come along! It is another four miles to the Castle of Love and Intrigue."

Vladimir Ilyich and I trotted beside him. "Why is it called by such a sinister name?"

'Ah, there were once two lovers, she the wife of a merchant, he the owner of the castle. He seized her from under her husband's very nose and swept her up to his stronghold. But the husband followed with a band of fighting-men and demanded her return. He did not get her, because the castle was impregnable at that time, but he managed to set spies inside it who furthered his cause. Alas, the lady was not worth all this bother: her lover soon finding out that she was intriguing with her husband's friends as well as with his own.'

"And what happened to her?"

Pappy made a vague gesture. "Oh, he threw her over the cliff."

After that I didn't feel I could appreciate the grim, grey pile which clung so precariously to the edge of a precipice that one felt the least breath of wind might send it cascading a thousand feet into the valley below. Besides, it was now three o'clock and I was hungry, a sensation shared with Vladimir Ilyich. The biscuits had long since been eaten, and we were at least seven miles from home. Pappy and the engineer, inured by tragic experience to the agonies of semi-starvation, had little sympathy with our plight, but the former produced a small packet of chocolate. "In return for your kindness over the strawberries," he said.

I thanked him, but it didn't go far between twelve hungry children. Wild thoughts of drinking such copious draughts of Narzan that I should float back to Kislovodsk without further bother surged through my head, but were abandoned by memory of the balloon-like feeling which had attacked me earlier. There was nothing for it but to follow Pappy to Medovy Vodopad (Honey Waterfall).

We reached this place through a wild and rather frightening canyon, the perpendicular walls of which almost met above our heads. Slithering on the green, slimy stones in my heelless rubber shoes was a dangerous process which absorbed all my attention, but Pappy had got his second

wind and was well away with descriptions of the hundreds of canyons which, apparently, surrounded Kislovodsk. At last we stumbled to safety into a sort of green basin hung with sub-tropical creepers, and here two immense waterfalls met with a thunderous roar and splashed down through the Olkhovka canyon to Lermontov's Grotto. "You remember Lermontov's novel, *A Hero of our Times*, and the scene at the base of the cliff where his two principal characters fought a duel? Well, that cliff is only a little distance from here."

I said yes mendaciously, and glanced at the engineer. Russian or no Russian, it surely wasn't right for a man in his condition to walk all this way in the clammy heat of an almost subterranean passage? He mopped his brow and smiled at me: "It is all right; soon we shall be back at Pjatachek."

We plunged on through another, narrower canyon where the river growled angrily at our feet and the sticky trailers of the creepers clung to our faces at every step. The light was green and eerie, and I was terrified lest the small Vladimir Ilyich should miss his footing and disappear into foamy brown water; but sure-footed as a goat he kept step beside me, exclaiming with glee as our tunnel grew darker, "It is like the cinema, Citizeness!"

The grotto was a vast cave in the wall. Water dripped down the back of my neck as I stood in it, but the ferns with which it was fringed were worth more than a cursory examination; lovely, feathery fronds that curled gracefully from crevices in the rock. Here, I thought, people had made love, men had sought sanctuary from pursuers, rebels had lived secure from justice. . . . For in the drip-drip of the water were a hundred secret histories belonging to old Russia, histories with which Soviet Russia quite rightly had but little patience, yet which interested me enormously.

Pappy contented himself with digging little fern roots out with a penknife and depositing them carefully in the now

empty chocolate box. Then his war-cry sounded: "Come along, come along!" and we helter-skeltered down another canyon into the Old Park that led to the Narzan Gallery. Here the visitors to Kislovodsk took their ease, sat in the shade of palm-trees, played chess at little tables, walked slowly with their wives and children. Here, too, on a flat piece of high ground, an orchestra played wild hill-dances, and all the young folk within miles congregated. All the Cossack children immediately clamoured to be allowed to join in the fun, and even the engineer, inspired by the heady music of his people, began to sway to its rhythm.

"You will dance with me?" yelled Pappy.

I shook my head, but he paid no heed and whirled me through the benches of spectators to the dancing-place. . . .

When the music stopped I said firmly that I must go home. It was almost six o'clock and I had eaten nothing since early morning in Mineralny Vody. Rather to my surprise the Cossack children agreed, so we trudged down through the park, past the great well where people gathered for glasses of Narzan (so did we, because it was free there), through the gallery to Pjatachek.

"We will meet again," beamed Pappy, "in an hour's time. Then I will show you the Beryozovaya Balka, a canyon much finer than you have seen so far."

My head ached and my feet throbbed. As usual Vladimir Ilyich saved me: "But Pappy, can't we have some more strawberries?"

Watching the family disappear in search of that succulent fruit, I thought the child showed undoubted gifts for diplomacy.

"Only an hour and a half," Pappy crowed roguishly over his shoulder.

In the dining-room of the Grand Hotel a waiter greeted me sourly. "This is no hour for a meal, Citizeness."

I gaped: surely in Russia one fed whenever one felt inclined? But Kislovodsk, I must understand, was different.

Here there were very sick people on strict diets which did not allow of the usual haphazard meal-times. Feebly, I requested a boiled egg and some black bread, for sustenance I must have.

After ten minutes the cook appeared. "The eggs are not fit to boil, Citizeness, but I can make an omelet?"

My refusal was emphatic.

He sighed deeply, "The caviare is good; but it is the black, you understand, not the grey?"

I dined sumptuously on a pot of caviare which would have fetched at least thirty-five shillings in England, and sought my room. It was a nice room, with a balcony overhanging Pjatachek and a very handsome wash-basin enclosed in a real mahogany case. Having washed myself in bits (still regretting the Narzan baths) I slept for an hour and awakened to vision of a large pool of water on the bedroom floor. I had not realized that main drainage had not yet percolated to Kislovodsk, and that the beautiful mahogany cabinet screened a large pail which had naturally overflowed during my extensive ablutions. As the carpet was one straight from some Tsarist mansion something had to be done at once, so I rang the bell.

Twenty minutes continued clanging brought the floor-man. "Will you please unlock your door, Citizeness?"

"I didn't lock it, turn the catch."

He turned valiantly with no success. "It is a self-locking door: what you call the 'Yale' in Europe."

What Yale Locks would have said to that door I can't bear to think. I twiddled it from the inside, and the entire hotel staff twiddled it from the outside—but nothing happened.

"Slide ten kopeks into the lock," said an agonized voice.

I slid fifty kopeks without result. "Get a locksmith," I shouted. That lock was an insatiable maw.

There was a whispered consultation without. Being Rest

Day all the locksmiths were off duty. But they could not leave the *Angleeski* immured in her room.

I remembered Pappy, and chortled. "Yes, you can. All the *Angleeski* wants is her supper, and you can hand her that from the next balcony."

But that was not the way to treat visitors. While I sunned myself on the balcony and watched the varied life of Pjatachek, the employees of the Grand Hotel scoured the town for locksmiths. Delighted, I watched Pappy and his monstrous family depart empty and forlorn (but I was glad to see traces of strawberry round the mouth of Vladimir Ilyich); then I settled down to enjoy the pageant that coloured this queer street. Men strode along, naked to the waist, carrying their babies on their shoulders; boys in embroidered caps darted in and out of the crowd, while others shrieked with mirth as they splashed in the wake of a water-cart; hill-women with three veils, one about their heads, the second about their shoulders, and the third about their waists, did their shopping—and I was pleased to note that bars of soap bulked large in their baskets; young girls tossed their heads, flirted and giggled.

It was eight o'clock before an irate Stakhanovite from Magnitogorsk, who had been dug out of his sanatorium by a desperate hotel staff, opened my door.

"Thank heaven," said the floor-man feelingly, "she isn't an ordinary tourist!"

I invited the Stakhanovite to have some *piva*, and we strolled up Pjatachek to the café by the station.

"Narzan," said the waiter severely.

But I wasn't being caught like that again. "Not a bath, a drink. *Piva*."

"There is no *piva*."

"Why?"

He twiddled his fingers on the table-cloth. "The distance—and then nobody here drinks *piva*. Some Caucasian wine!"

The Stakhanovite said: "All our waiters are inefficient. But that is because they are old men; we cannot get young men to take on such a stupid work."

The Caucasian wine arrived: it was very yellow and very sour, but my companion assured me it was superb. "Once the rest of the world trades fully with U.S.S.R., people will forsake the wines of France and Germany for our Caucasian wine."

I hoped sincerely that when that day came I should be beyond appreciation of good wine.

Below us in the street I caught a glimpse of Pappy and his brood hurrying towards the station. . . . I never saw them again.

II

The next morning I drifted around Kislovodsk, trying to get the *tempo* of this strange holiday town. The orchestra in front of the station was now playing the 1812 Symphony; the one at the back an ancient lyric which I recognized as being *The Woman up in Room Thirteen*; the loud-speaker was still talking about the Kislovodsk-Sochi Black Sea de Luxe Express, and I thought I had better have a look at this famous train.

It certainly was amazing. There was no "plain travel," every coach being decorated in blue and gold. There was a dance-room, a dining-room, and a smoking-room (but as Russian men smoked anywhere and everywhere I failed to see the need for this appellation). There were no sleeping compartments, but in a journey of twenty-odd hours such things were scarcely necessary. It was the only punctual train in Russia. Each morning at eleven o'clock it steamed out, wireless blaring, people singing, the remaining population cheering, on its odyssey to the Black Sea coast. The occupants were clearly on holiday, therefore they spent roubles willingly. The children waved red flags, ate fruit, and gallivanted around their parents who grinned indulgently

as they fanned themselves with palm-leaves. The young people began to dance before ever the train left the station and, knowing Russians, I have no doubt they kept this up most of the way to Sochi. Older men played chess with a concentration unparalleled in such a din, and younger men stood in the observation coaches discussing, not the glory of the Caucasian range, but the benefits of the programme for the New Constitution.

They were children, all of them. The children who were non-existent in a troubled Europe, the children I had come so far to find. Looking at them I thanked God I had come to Soviet Russia and won a clearer, sweeter outlook on humanity.

"Citizeness," said an earnest voice in English behind me, "Are you a Communist?"

I waved to the train as it began to move. "No, I'm nothing." Turning my head I saw, to my horror, that it was the English-speaking gentleman from Mineralny Vody.

"But I thought you were bound for Rostov?"

"I was, but the train was too late—much too late. And they told me that in this place I would see the real Russia."

"I see. And where did you learn to address me as Citizeness?"

"Everybody does," he said stiffly. "I read about the correct mode in a translation. But what worries me is this: are you a Communist that you rejoice so much over these deplorable people who conduct their lives in such a stupid fashion?"

"I have told you already that I have no politics. But if anybody could make me into a red-hot Communist, you would."

His voice followed me down Pjatachek, "You misunderstand me: what I want is *pre-cise* information."

III

The thing to do in Kislovodsk was to go and listen to the band in the Old Park. It was very pleasant there, under the trees, while the orchestra played Chopin Waltzes; but just when the music and the scent of flowers had lured me into a comatose condition some one stepped heavily on my foot. I said "Damn" loudly, and a woman next to me chuckled: "If it isn't grand to hear a person use a real English swear!"

Her name was Ada M—— and she came from Baltimore, where she had taken her degree in medicine; and in the days when the Soviets sent their sons far and wide in search of knowledge, a certain young Tatar doctor took a course in psychology at Baltimore and married Ada. He had wanted to come home: she, ready to try anything once, had come with him to Kazan, that dusty, wind-swept city on the Volga. She had been welcomed by starvation, appalling sanitary conditions, and a fiercely resentful people. She had remained—for five long years—to see want give place to plenty and to experience the breakdown of resistance to modern medical methods.

"And after that," she told me, "I took out citizenship papers. After all, this blamed country gives me something to work for—free rest when I'm ill (I've got a weak heart); a pension when I'm fifty; splendid education for my two children. Where else would I get that? Besides, I like the life. I help my husband run the Kazan hospital . . . and just fancy a Jew married to a Tatar!"

That last fact was indeed extraordinary. If you had introduced a Tatar to a Jew in Tsarist Russia you would have seen the fur fly in two minutes.

"But don't the closed borders worry you? I mean, the feeling that you can't get out if you want to do so?"

She regarded me sombrelly. "What made you ask that? It's the one thing that sometimes makes me regret my

action. Three years ago my mother and sister came over to see me, but now my mother is ill. If anything happens to her what can I do? I can neither go to America nor send her money. And with friends, too, it is difficult. Will you do me a favour? When you get back to London ring the Almoner at — Hospital and tell her I'm well and happy?"

I wrote down that message, and several others. The woman was ill and must have had moments of intense loneliness. But her views on the Soviets were extraordinarily interesting because she had lived among them, worked with the people, for so long, and she had a shrewd American mind which took an all-round view of her subject. According to her, the advance in civilization in cities such as Kazan was quite astonishing, and she corroborated the contention of the little doctor in Kharkov that tremendous strides were being made in medicine and surgery. "And look at the Caucasus," she added. "Even four years ago when I was here the hill-women veiled their faces with their shawls, lived in mud huts along with their animals, cooked their food on dung fires, scowled whenever they saw a stranger. This year I find them coming down to the town to night-school, building themselves proper houses, even washing their children's clothes."

We walked up the hill together to her sanatorium, where she had an airy room done up in blue, and without any trace of an "institution" about it. "I pay nothing," she said. "This is the way the State looks after me when I am ill. I know myself I'm not good for much longer, because my heart's in a bad condition. But I'll die content, knowing that my children will have every chance to lead decent lives. When you get home I wish you'd tell people that the Soviet system has got beyond the experimental stage—it's a success."

I left her lying on her balcony looking down on the white town, and walked rather sadly down the hill. She was a

brave woman, this Ada M——, and she had chosen her life of her own free will, but I wished she could have gone home to Baltimore just once more.

IV

Before long I had experience of Kislovodsk's famous thunderstorms. I had planned to go for a drive round the hill-crests surrounding the town, and at three o'clock I stepped into a decrepit Ford driven by a cheerful Caucasian woman whose teeth flashed white from a face burnt almost black with the sun, and whose attire was, to put it mildly, extraordinary. Her frock was black satin, sleeveless and very *décolleté*, her head was bare, her arms covered in motor-grease, her feet encased in brown riding-boots. The effect was startling. On the running-board stood a youth, his arms draped about the windscreen, and when I asked why he was coming too, the driver nodded mysteriously and said that two pairs of hands were sometimes better than one. I pondered this enigmatic remark as we swung into the main boulevard, but failed to get its drift until huge black clouds suddenly piled up in the sky and a large rain-drop splashed on to my nose.

Then the heavens opened and poured sheets of water on the busy street. Within five minutes the axles of the car were under water and I was floating in the back seat. "Just a little storm," yelled the driver between the thunder-claps, "it will be over in a few minutes."

My smile was a trifle strained. The car possessed no hood, and it seemed more than likely that we should all three be swept overboard. Pedestrians struggled to doorways through a torrent which reached to their waists; the tarred surface of the road swirled gaily downstream; the palms and acacias which bordered the avenue waved fantastically above the flood, indeed the whole of Kislovodsk was in imminent danger of being annihilated.

For half an hour I clung frantically to the back seat, expecting every moment the Ford would be lifted off its wheels, but the driver and her companion maintained their fatalistic attitude. This was just a usual thunder-storm. In a few minutes. . . .

Without warning the rain ceased; the clouds disappeared; the sun shone from a blue sky. The driver raised one dripping shoulder: "Very soon now Serge and I can start the car."

I was too wet to answer. In any other country I would have got out and swum, if necessary, back to my hotel; but the serene indifference of these Russians to the crashing hatred of the elements stiffened my backbone. If they could sit and wait for this rushing brown river to become a street again so could I.

We sat—for two hours.

Gradually the flood diminished. Lorry and car drivers shook plugs and carburettors and laid them negligently on the bonnets to dry in the sun, while they themselves sucked ice-creams or smoked cigarettes. People peered cautiously from shops and houses, and then emerged to skip through a foot of water from one piece of unbroken roadway to the next. When the river had dwindled to a small stream, which ran happily down to the tram-lines, one realized that the road-surface had become a paving more crazy than any conceived by the most ardent landscape gardener.

The driver and Serge yawned, stretched, and clambered down to attend to the Ford, which was firmly embedded in a gluey mess of stones and mud. After much pushing and prodding Serge put his back against the right rear wheel while the driver, by some magic, started the engine. With a series of deafening explosions we were off—with Serge shouting "hurrah!" as he flung himself into the soaking seat beside me. Skirting the worst bits of the broken road, skidding madly, hurtling through water-splashes and pot-holes, we accelerated to some sixty miles an hour, and I

prayed for death with a fervour I have never known before or since.

The driver swerved to the left and charged up a steep slope, oblivious of the boulders which bestrewed her path. "I live in one of those houses"—she waved her hand towards a row of cottages on the far bank of a ditch which the storm had transformed into a waterfall.

I yelled back: "How do you reach them?"

Serge guffawed. "She doesn't. Always for a day or two after a storm she has to sleep in the garage because the bridges are swept away."

It seemed a desperate way of living, but I was too engrossed in clinging to sanity and the side of the car to think very much about it. Up we went and up, round tortuous bends, over ruts that no English driver would have attempted, through morasses which looked like lakes of treacle. Below us was the delicious vista of the Valley of Delight, but I screwed my eyes tight shut and wished only that this nightmare drive might end. . . . Kislovodsk would have my bones yet.

That we survived three hours of crawling up precipices and shooting down gullies was a miracle, the secret of which remained with the driver. That woman was superhuman. Sitting bolt upright in her ridiculous evening gown, she slewed the wheel round in astonishing fashion, occasionally shrieking to Serge to get out and put stones beneath the back tyres lest we slid to perdition. And all the time she kept up a running fire of conversation. . . . Did I see this or that peak; did I not admire the Big and Little Dzhinal mountains; was not the Pastbishchny Range glorious?

I said: "Yes, yes, yes," and my sopping clothes flapped in the wind while Serge wrung the water out of his trousers.

At 9.30 we whizzed back to the Grand Hotel and I limped painfully to the desk. "To-morrow I will go to Elbrus *on horseback*."

But the driver was behind me. "No, no, Citizeness,"

she beamed. "I will drive you there, the road by Bermamyt and Nalchik is splendid."

The clerk said doubtfully, "I do not know if there are any horses." Considering that whole herds of them galloped over every hill-side in the district it seemed a feeble remark.

"Of course there are horses; and there is a guide called Ivan. My friend M. P—— told me of him."

Clerk and driver ignored this and burst into lyric praise of the motor road to Nalchik. Why, they said, bump about uncomfortably on an animal's back when you could travel in comfort by car? Why take a week over a return journey which could be done in two days? Why sleep in mountain huts when you could stay one night in luxury at the In-tourist hotel at the foot of Elbrus? Why, why, why . . . ?

A forgotten quality of Scots tenacity aided me. I was going to Elbrus on horseback and I was not going to be defeated by bureaucracy. "To-morrow morning at nine o'clock Ivan must be here," I said sternly.

The clerk sighed. "But food, Citizeness, food?"

"You can have my meal-tickets and put me up a large parcel. When that is finished we can buy food in the hill villages."

The driver surprised me by weeping. "It is so unsafe," she cried, "so dangerous."

Dangerous! This woman with nerves of steel who would have put any European racing-driver to shame talking about the dangers of riding horseback.

But we parted friends. "I shall come along next week," she informed me anxiously, "and see that you have returned safely."

The clerk sighed again and sent a little boy to find Ivan. I retreated to my room, where the lock forced by the Stakanovite still hung useless on the door, and sat on my balcony watching the pageant of Pjatachek. By to-morrow night I should be right among the Mountains of the Moon. . . .

I did not know then about Vladikavkaz.

V

Next morning at eight o'clock I descended to an empty dining-room. The waiter was fatherly and very sad, the manager doleful, the clerk rheumy-eyed. No occupant of the condemned cell could have been treated with more tragic politeness. Their concern lessened, however, when I demolished one of the cook's celebrated omelets and several slices of bread and honey. Perhaps, they murmured doubtfully among themselves, the Citizeness really did know how to sit a Caucasian horse? Knowing full well that I sat like a sack of potatoes on the best regulated animal I went on stolidly eating—anything was better than that awful Ford.

Nine o'clock, half-past nine, ten . . . still no sign of Ivan. At eleven he swung jauntily up Pjatachek scattering the populace, a magnificent bearded figure in red sheepskin cap and long black coat. His horse was beautiful, but on a leading-rein he had *a mule*. I approached gingerly. "What is this?"

"Your horse, Citizeness. His name is Vladikavkaz, the Conqueror of the Caucasus."

From the moment that Vladikavkaz rolled a wicked eye I knew that I had not met him: he had met me. But with the entire hotel staff grouped behind me; with Ivan packing an enormous parcel of food into his saddle-bag; with the inhabitants of Kislovodsk crowding admiringly round there was only one thing to do—mount the creature.

We set off to a chorus of good wishes, and I wished earnestly that I had a more suitable kit than a white cotton frock.

As we climbed the steep path to Mount Koltso I felt soothed. The sun beat on our backs, the meadows were gay with flowers, Ivan was a most entertaining companion, all around us the mountains sprang up, white and glorious against a cobalt sky. And Vladikavkaz stepped delicately, like Agag, along the narrow track.

Ivan said: "I could take you to villages hundreds of miles away in the hills where the chiefs still govern the people by ancient tribal law. Once every year they hold a day of judgment when all those who have done evil during the past twelve months are brought to book. If the chief decides they are guilty then . . ." He made a significant gesture across his throat and grinned.

"But I thought the Soviets had changed all that?"

"They have done wonders, but the Caucasus are so vast and the population so scattered that there are many tribes they have not yet reached. One thing they have done, even in the farthest villages, is to take away fear. When I was a child every stranger was an enemy, every shot that echoed through the hills a sign of war. Now the people come down freely to the towns or to the railway and feel secure because they know they will not be hurt. You see, Tsarist Russia tried for hundreds of years to conquer the Caucasus by force. Every so often they sent the Cossacks and other picked troops to make raids on the villages, to shoot the tribal leaders, to round up the mountain sheep so that the shepherds should be starved into submission. But we are proud peoples and those methods only made us the more determined to keep our independence. My grandfather and my father were both killed by Tsarist soldiers in hand-to-hand fighting and I myself remember seeing one of those raids."

We rode on in silence. In the glittering beauty of this Alpine scene it was difficult to imagine the days of which Ivan spoke. The path grew steeper as we neared Koltso and began to edge our way round his craggy sides where gentians and edelweiss filled every cranny in the rocks and rock irises and roses grew in the short, thymy turf which carpeted the pass between this giant of the Pastbishchny Range and his fellow-mountains. Turning a sharp corner Ivan pointed ahead and I stared at a nearer, more majestic Elbrus which rose amazingly above the black ridge over which we had to travel that afternoon.

"Now we will have dinner," said Ivan. "Afterwards we go on to Sedlo-Gora."

I dismounted and patted Vladikavkaz's neck. Really, I was beginning to feel quite sympathetic towards the animal. He rolled the other eye and nibbled grass, and I remarked that he seemed a very modest conqueror.

Ivan laughed. "I have known him many years," he said enigmatically.

We squatted on the turf and opened the parcel from the hotel. Its contents looked sufficient to feed a battalion for a week. Two chickens, jointed; fifteen apples and peaches; two bottles of Narzan; a large slab of melting butter and another of yellow cheese; a loaf of black bread and a lapsed mass which turned out to be caviare sandwiches. Everything was wrapped in sections of *Pravda*, but in the clear mountain air one's appetite triumphed over a bit of newsprint. I asked Ivan if he liked Narzan and he clapped his hands delightedly, so I handed him both bottles and my beer opener, which impressed him so much that he clapped the caps on the bottles so soon as he had taken them off and tried to operate on them again.

"But Narzan cannot interest you? It springs out of the ground all around you."

He manœuvred the caps once more. "Ah, but it tastes so different from the bottle! Will you not drink some?"

"No, I would much rather have some water from that stream."

Ivan was apprehensive. "Water? That is so dull." But when he realized I was serious he obediently trotted across the grass and filled my cup from the rivulet that bubbled out of the rock. "But I think it is foolish," he added.

I drank the cold, crystal-clear stuff and disagreed with him.

We started on the caviare sandwiches. Four hours in a saddle-bag had not improved them, but they were eatable. Then we took a wing of chicken apiece and I sniffed dubiously. The smell of Russia was a little more omnipresent

than usual—it might be Ivan; one bite told me my mistake. I thought hopefully that the taste of *Pravda* had made a difference and washed my portion in the stream. The second bite proved beyond question that the poor bird had been dead for quite a long time. I hesitated! hunger won. That high and tough chicken eaten on Koltso was most satisfying.

Ivan's subsequent behaviour spoilt my peace. Having gnawed his wing he popped the bones back beside the rest of the chicken and rolled the whole lot up again in newspaper. "I do not like waste," he said seriously, "and the marrow in the bones is very good for one."

I chewed a withered peach and felt rather queasy. The prospect of endless meals of bad chicken was not alluring; the thought that I should never be able to tell whether I was eating an untouched piece or a bit that had already been sampled by Ivan was alarming. But there was no time for morbid reflection as we had to push on to Sedlo-Gora and Ivan was already repacking the saddle-bag. . . .

It was at this point that Vladikavkaz decided to master me. Very probably he smelt the chicken, for he refused a caviare sandwich, put his ears back and rolled both eyes. Ivan hoisted me into the saddle, just missing a vicious kick from a hind-leg, and then Vladikavkaz proceeded to do everything a mule can do. He stood on his hind-legs, he sat down, he snapped, he kicked in all directions. Somehow, after three ignominious descents on to the grass we started off, Vladikavkaz doing a crab-like crawl up the hill, punctuated by most disconcerting wriggles of his back every few minutes. Through the hot afternoon we padded, Ivan riding easily ahead, I clasping the mule's neck and regretting the Ford.

"Sedlo-Gora is the Saddle Mountain," said Ivan. "From it you get a beautiful view of the main range."

But all my energies were with Vladikavkaz, and my love for the Mountains of the Moon seemed, at the moment, a

poor pale thing. I could not appreciate the Alpine meadows through which we rode, although they were a mosaic of brilliant flowers, or the cool, crisp air which blew against our faces, or the purple shadows that lay on the snowy mountain-sides above us. Indeed, I wasn't a human being any longer, I was just a bundle of antagonism towards all mules.

Towards evening Vladikavkaz changed, became again the docile beast of the morning. Cocking his head at me as much as to say, "Well, I hope you've learnt your lesson?" he shook himself and then broke into a brisk trot, following Ivan down a narrow gorge which led through the hills to the path to the Big and Little Dzhinal mountains. "Here are some of the caves which have been hollowed out by the winds from the main range," Ivan told me; and curious places they were, penetrating deep into the hill-sides and with smooth, polished surfaces. For those shining distant mountains could change to savage mood in a few moments and send icy gales to devastate the lesser Pastbishchnys that looked so serene and smiling under the setting sun. They could send fierce storms also to dash the mosaic of the meadows into a bruised, colourless pulp, and they could send tongues of lightning flashing across the valleys to shrivel the mountain trees.

But to-day it was hard to believe that anything could ever disturb the serenity of Elbrus and his companions, now flushed rose-pink in the evening light. Now the whole panorama of the range stretched before us, and as we left Sedlo-Gora behind, their colour altered amazingly as the sun dipped to the west. Violet, sapphire, emerald, gold they shimmered in its last rays while we rode on through the hazy blue dusk to the village where we were to spend the night.

The entire population turned out to greet us and to escort us to our hut, a pleasant, clean little place which smelt of *Petroushka* and held a table, two chairs, a mattress stuffed

with bracken and covered with a red blanket, and—wonder of wonders—a large pier glass screwed on to the wall. After one glance in this I decided to drape it with the old tweed overcoat I had brought with me as protection against the chilly mountain nights, because the reflection which grinned back at me was lamentable. My hair was blown in streaks about my face and was bleached in zebra-like stripes by the sun. My frock was crumpled and bore distinct traces of caviare and chicken. Face, arms, and legs were mahogany colour decorated by little rivulets of perspiration. . . . No, a mirror was not for me.

A small girl sidled in with a large jug of water from a nearby spring. She had little Russian and I could not understand her dialect, but she went through a pantomime of drinking and then pointed to my lips. "Mouth," she announced proudly.

I swallowed greedily. Nothing had ever tasted so good.

She trotted out and presently returned staggering under the weight of an enormous bucket. Another pantomime ensued and then her finger shot out once more. "Body."

She watched my ablutions with immense interest; then she sniffed my cake of soap, seized it and rushed out of the hut, shouting as she went. Immediately a babel arose outside, and a knock sounded on the door. "Citizeness," came Ivan's voice. "The people are very interested because the little girl says you wash yourself all over with soap that smells of flowers. May they come in and see you, because it would be such an experience for them?"

I clutched my most inadequate towel about my middle, trusting that the door would not swing wide to admit the populace. "No, Ivan, I am sorry, because they are very kind people and I like them, but in my country nobody watches anybody else washing. Tell them that they may keep the soap that smells of flowers instead."

There was a chorus of acclamation and then sounds of scuffling, during which I supposed that a free fight was

going on over the soap. In Kharkov they had said: "Come and see the *Angleeski* eat." Here, apparently, the amusement was, "Come and see the *Angleeski* wash."

Refreshed, I joined the throng outside and learnt that the belles of the village were in retirement—with the soap. When they reappeared their faces were smarmed in dried lather. "It would never do," said one of them thoughtfully, "to wash away this beautiful smell with water."

The women showed me their houses with pride. Some were of stone, roughly but well built, others were log cabins, and a few were the old mud huts of which I had already heard. These had holes in the roof through which the smoke from the fire was supposed to go—but didn't, and they sprawled like so many toadstools at the far end of the village street. Here the older inhabitants lived with their hens, goats, and an occasional sheep, and shook their heads over modern ways. But everything was surprisingly clean and the people were kind, eager creatures who only wanted to be as hospitable as possible.

The children fingered my belongings and were most tickled with my handbag. The women brought me copy-books in which they were practising Russian writing. "See, see!" they exclaimed, and I studied their laborious scrawls and wondered afresh at the Soviets' desire for knowledge. The men brought me wild cherries in cabbage leaves and showed me the chessmen they had carved from the ivory of boars' tusks. Everybody was friendly, happy, and at rest. The village was set in a little green valley, and on the grass before the houses two boys tended a huge wood fire while the women cut a saddle of Caucasian lamb into thick slices and skewered them on to a long wooden skewer with rounds of strong onion in between the slices. Then we all cooked our own supper, twiddling the skewers above the flames until the meat was ready, and sat cross-legged in a circle to devour this *shashelik*, the staple dish of the Caucasian peasant.

Ivan rushed to the hut and came back with a knife and fork kept there for the use of tourists, but as I had no plate I ignored these and ate the juicy, tender meat in my fingers as the villagers did. After the chicken of midday this was a meal for the gods; *shashelik*, black bread, golden butter, and glasses of pale, exquisite tea.

"We dance," said the villagers. "Will you join us?"

I had to refuse because the punishment meted out to me by Vladikavkaz prohibited any movement whatsoever, but I said it would give me great pleasure to watch the others. So the fire was piled higher, for the mountain nights are sharp even in midsummer, and the older people sat around it while the accordion player perched himself on a flat slab of rock and the young folk began the nodding of the head and the clapping of the hands which is the prelude to the dance in Russia. A youth called Mischa, very evidently the catch of the district, rode down the valley and was welcomed with thunderous applause. Tall, slim, and red-haired, he wore tight-fitting black breeches and a magnificent embroidered blouse of grey silk, and the girls pelted him with wild flowers as he dismounted. Then he strode forward and broke into the wild whirl of a Caucasian dance. Faster he went and faster, the gay baggy sleeves of his blouse flashing all colours of the rainbow in the firelight, the red of his hair a beacon against the indigo sky. A village girl joined him, pirouetting coquettishly, hands on hips, another followed with the swaying, seductive movement of the arms which signifies a wish to be wooed, a third twirled on bare feet before him. He danced with each in turn, gallantly and with a swagger, and behind them the clapping grew to a frenzy of sound and the old folk rocked back and to in time to the music. Out of the night came the gallop of horses' hooves and a Caucasian officer, immaculate in white tunic and peaked cap, clattered up the village street. Swarthy and arrogant, he was a direct contrast to Mischa, and the women retreated as these two leaped and twisted and bent

in the mad delight of the dance which Ivan told me was one of the most ancient and celebrated in Russia.

The music throbbed, died, began a slow, dreamy tune. The whole population, from tiny boys and girls to grandfathers and grandmothers, took partners for a sort of *pas de quatre*. The moon rose, a silver globe, above the shoulder of Sedlo-Gora and turned the scene into one of unearthly beauty. Far to the east the main Caucasus were blue-green towers stippled with cloud shadows of deep mauve. All around were black valleys fringed with gleaming silver ridges. On the dancing-green the bright skirts and multi-coloured shawls of the women, the dark coats and red fur caps of the men, the gay clothes of the children, formed a miraculous pattern which changed from scarlet to gold, and from gold to white as the dancers moved between firelight and moonlight.

What was the use of trying to produce a fumbling word-picture of that sight? Why couldn't I paint?

Much later the dancing stopped. More wood was piled on the fire and beakers of rough Caucasian wine were handed round. Men began to sing, first softly and then with a crescendo of sound which echoed and re-echoed among the surrounding mountains. Centuries ago the same songs had been sung in the same place. . . . Perhaps when Jason and his Argonauts braved the stormy Black Sea and swept up to Colchis (which is the Kutais of to-day), they heard these warlike airs ringing down from the hills? Perhaps Prometheus, groaning in his purgatory on Kasbek, lifted his great head to listen to their call? Here on the ridge of Pastbishchny time stood still, and the cold facts of history, either new or old, faded into insignificance, and the rich fabric of mythology wrapped one round.

Ivan nudged me. "We have an early start to-morrow, Citizeness."

I said good night to the company, who rose and followed me to the hut. I explained carefully that there would be no

more washing and no more soap, but this did not prevent them from congregating round the doorway and peering eagerly through the window until I asked Ivan to shoo them away.

"Do not worry, Citizeness. I will see they go, and I will sleep outside the hut."

I had just enough energy left to say, "Well, please put Vladikavkaz at the other end of the village," before I fell asleep on my bracken bed.

Ivan woke me at seven with a glass of tea. "It is a perfect morning; just right for Bermamyt."

The next half-hour was misery. I had been stiff enough the previous night but now each movement was an agony, my limbs felt as if they were encased in lead, and my back as if every vertebra had received a lash from the knout. Vladikavkaz had assuredly done his conquering thoroughly. One of the women produced some home-made salve with which I smeared myself, but while it certainly soothed it also smelt, and every fly, wasp, and mosquito in the Caucasus came to sample it.

"Come and see us on your way back!" cried the villagers, and we were off in a flurry of handshakes, the children skipping beside us for the first half-mile. This morning the mountains were sharp against a pearly sky and as the valley narrowed into a canyon the air struck damp and chill through my thin clothes. Vladikavkaz was in genial mood, bustling past Ivan's horse on the rough track, tossing his head wildly, emitting the most curious snorts as he did so.

"His father and mother came from Bermamyt," Ivan told me, but I replied sourly that I was sure the mule had no filial affection for his parents. His friskiness was entirely due to the amount of food given to him by the village children.

"Go ahead," said Ivan. "I want to shoot some black game."

As I looked back at him I thought how he had changed

from the Ivan who set out from Kislovodsk. The farther we penetrated into the hills the more fiercely Caucasian he became, sitting his mount arrogantly, his rifle lying across the saddle. The thin veneer of modernity given him by his work as guide dropped from him like a cloak and showed the real Ivan, the proud, lawless hillman unfettered by any laws save those of his own tribe. I rode on feeling that the Ivan of to-day was more natural than the Ivan of yesterday.

Suddenly there was a crack from his rifle—and I collapsed on to Vladikavkaz's neck while a blackcock fell like a plummet from the sky a few yards in front of me. "Don't do that," I gasped as Ivan cantered past us, picked up the bird and tied it to his saddle.

"But it is for the pot, Citizeness." Then he added with a grin, "And I am a good shot."

He was, but it took me all that day to get accustomed to bullets whistling a few feet above my head, and the fact that our road lay through gloomy canyons through which a green light filtered did not help matters. At two o'clock we halted for dinner and I sat on a slimy rock while Ivan unwrapped the chicken. "Ha," he sniffed, "it will be good to-day."

The greenish light could not quite account for the peculiar colour of that chicken, but I was so ravenous after our long ride that I took a leg, prayed that it had not rested next one of Ivan's bones, and began to eat it. The pungent flavour of yesterday had departed; most strangely the bird now tasted of Sanatogen. I am ashamed to say I picked the bone clean. "To-night," Ivan said, "I will borrow a pot and cook our game. Look . . ." From his capacious pockets he pulled three pulpy carrots, a couple of beetroot and half a tired cabbage. "We shall have a beautiful stew."

"But where did you get the vegetables from?"

He smiled seraphically. "Out of a garden in Kislovodsk. I knew they would not miss them and that we could not get any up in the mountains."

The ethics of the thing were definitely wrong, but in this world of peaks they didn't seem to matter very much.

"May I have your superb opener?" asked Ivan.

I giggled and handed it over. Ivan loved my beer opener. He had treasured the caps of the Narzan bottles, and although these had by now been filled many times at different springs, he pressed the caps on again each time for the sheer joy of using the "superb opener."

After Vladikavkaz's usual midday display of temper, we trotted on through the canyon and began to climb to Bermamyt. "We can leave the horses near the top," Ivan said firmly, "and climb the rest of the way on foot. The view of the Elbrus glaciers from the peak is marvellous."

I gazed apprehensively at an absolutely perpendicular rock-face which rose sheer to the sky. "I am no Alpinist. Besides, I don't believe any human being could get up that."

"Ah, we go round the promontory and up the other side."

We went round . . . and round, until I felt quite dizzy. Riding Vladikavkaz up a steep, three feet wide track with a wall of smooth rock on the one side and a precipice on the other was no joke, and Ivan would persist in his shooting, a hopeless business since most of his victims hurtled into the abyss below. "You don't like waste: why then do you shoot birds you have no hope of retrieving?"

"They will feed the foxes in the valley," he remarked philosophically, "or perhaps a little bear."

I clung to Vladikavkaz and trusted no "little bear" would amble round the next corner.

Presently we reached a plateau where Ivan tethered the horses to pegs placed ready in the rock. "Now we climb. I will take the saddle-bag and you will carry your coat."

I looked at the cliffs ahead. "How far is it?"

"Oh, about six hundred feet."

Excuses leapt to my tongue. "But we have to stay the night in the Intourist hut; we cannot leave the beasts here

all that time? And I am very stiff and my coat is awkward to carry."

Ivan was inexorable. "I will fetch the horses when I have made you comfortable in the hut and prepared our supper. Put your coat on, then you will not feel its weight so much."

Not even my celebrated Russian swears could move the man. Hunched in my thick coat, a grilling sun melting my back and a stiff wind blistering my face, I crawled from foothold to foothold in dumb misery, the worn rubber soles of my shoes slipping horribly on the stone. "Take them off," commanded Ivan, but he had to do this for me, as I was literally transfixed on a narrow ledge. Knotting the laces he swung the deplorable things about his neck and I curled my bare toes on the rock and felt a shade happier.

But the peak of Bermamyt was worth all discomfort. From it one saw the glaciers of Elbrus, fiery lakes under the evening sun, and behind them the razor-edged spurs cut the skyline, and beyond the white masses of the Dombai-Elgen and the Amana mountains rose in all their beauty. So near were the twin peaks of Elbrus that I felt I merely needed to put out my hand to touch their shining loveliness. . . . In reality thirty miles of foothills separated us, but the air was so pure, so crystal-clear, that in its distance was dissolved.

A dear old shepherd and his wife welcomed us to the hut. "*Angleeski!*" they repeated, and peered at me wonderingly. To them I was a creature from Mars. Over sixty, hill dwellers their life long, they had never seen a European before and the woman particularly was thrilled by my clothes. "*Krassivi, krassivi!*" she kept murmuring as she stroked my grubby and dishevelled cotton garment. So admiring was she that I gave her my silk vest, which she immediately put on *over* her dark blouse. (That was the catch in Russia, this giving away of clothes. The materials used by the people were still so shoddy and the pleasure caused by the gift of the oldest hat, frock, or underwear so

great, that one shed garments right and left with the result that one found one had mighty little left. Myself, I came out of the U.S.S.R. in rags . . . but that is another story which is told later on in this book.)

The old couple bustled about, putting the hut straight for me, and Ivan plucked and gutted two blackcock, tossing them into an enormous iron pot with the bruised vegetables and—horror of horrors—some of the chicken bones. “I will go now and fetch the horses; watch my stew, grandmother.”

Grandmother smoothed the pink silk vest and beamed. Was there anything the *Angleeski* would like before supper?

“Water,” said Ivan. “They are a funny race; they must be for ever washing themselves. For myself I think it a disgusting habit, but she is a nice woman and we must give her what she wants.”

I stared foolishly at the fire the old man was building beneath the pot on its tripod and wished I didn’t understand Russian.

“Water?” echoed Grandmother. “There is the pool which is fed by the spring: I will show her.”

So while Ivan departed down the cliffs I bathed gloriously in a deep pool set in a hollow of the rocks and thought I had never known complete contentment until this moment of floating in icy water watching Elbrus flush from rose to flame, from flame to purple, from purple to emerald as the rays of the dying sun lit his snow-covered peaks.

By the time I had rubbed down and dressed (regretting the vest in air grown suddenly sharp), Ivan had returned with the horses. Very evidently Vladikavkaz did not approve of rock-climbing, as he was giving a display of tantrums which called forth “ohs” and “ahs” of admiration from the old shepherd. “A spirited little animal,” he informed me gravely, and I agreed with vigour, wrapping myself in my coat and crouching nearer to the fire.

Chicken or no chicken Ivan’s stew was delicious. Somewhere about his pocketful person he must have secreted

garlic, and that pungent herb effectively destroyed all dubious flavours. We ate it noisily and without pretty manners from deep tin bowls provided by grandmother, first picking the blackcock in our fingers and then drinking the thick gravy. I gave the old man a withered peach with which he was so pleased that he said he would keep it "against the winter," and buttoned it securely into the breast-pocket of his voluminous black coat. (I have often thought of him since and wondered if a peach-tree sprouted miraculously from that pocket several months later.)

Replete, we squatted by the fire, and the moon rose bright in the sky, and the gigantic Caucasus glimmered eerily in its white light. "Why are you and your wife up here?" I asked the shepherd.

"We keep the hut, Citizeness. Later on in the summer we have many climbers, mostly young boys and girls. And then I tend my sheep."

Sheep on Bermamyt! The idea seemed ludicrous. But during the next few days I was to see these sure-footed mountain animals ranging over higher and rockier peaks than this and, apparently, finding sustenance.

We went early to bed, the shepherd, his wife, and Ivan huddled in their coats in the open, myself in state in the very comfortable hut. And in the dawn I saw the fulfilment of that mirage-like scene watched from the train near Mineralny Vody—the majesty of Elbrus, backed by the main range, in the first rays of the sun.

For the next week we rode through the foothills of the great mountain, seeing here a red fox streaking across our path, there a crested eagle soaring above our heads, once a baby bear, fluffy and exactly like a child's teddy, that waved a frightened paw before disappearing round a rock with a whisk of its bushy behind. Each midday that chicken made a reappearance; each evening Ivan cooked a game stew (never so good as the first one, since the stolen vegetables had given out). The people of the hill villages greeted us

with enthusiasm, we danced gloriously under the moon, I bathed in pools, springs and miniature waterfalls, Vladikavkaz gave up trying to teach me lessons. . . .

A brief week, but I lost all thought of time in the heady mountain air. This was the only life worth living, I thought, and realized that I had not felt so physically fit or so mentally content for years. Civilization seemed suddenly a meagre affair with nothing to commend it, and I developed a fierce scorn for all Europeans who came to this heavenly country only to poke around cities and then go home and yap about Communism. It astonished me that we seemed to be the only travellers, but Ivan told me that later in the year the youth of all Russia would ride, walk, and climb around Elbrus, and that the Ossetian and Georgian highways between us and Tiflis would be full of tourists. "But the foreigners do not really like the Caucasus," he added sadly. "They say conditions are too primitive."

Egging a jibbing Vladikavkaz through a narrow defile I felt immensely sorry for such folk.

It was on our way back to Kislovodsk that we met the agitator from Chicago. Caucasian by birth, he had, like so many others, gone to the States in youth, and had worked his way up in the stockyards to the position of foreman. In the Communist movement he saw his chance for fame and fortune, and now spent his days tub-thumping. "I don't give a darn for the Soviets myself," he said, "but I guess I'm the very man for the job. Why, ma'am, I just have to throw in a few Russian words and they think me the cat's whiskers."

He appeared, an incongruous small figure in a shiny navy-blue suit and a trilby hat, trudging down a valley by Big Dzhinal mountain. He had no luggage and the soles of his shoes flapped as he walked, but he was immensely cheerful. His organization in Chicago had paid all expenses and sent him back to Russia for two months to study the conditions of living, and to get propaganda for their cause, but they

had reckoned without their host. No sooner had he set foot on Soviet soil than he had been consumed by a desire to revisit his home which was some hundred and fifty miles in the hills from Kislovodsk. "Propaganda," he told me elegantly, "can go to hell: I want to see my brother. But those bloody bureaucrats in Moscow can't see that nohow. 'Look here,' they preach, 'you've been sent here in the sacred cause of Communism and we got to look after you. We ain't too good in your part of the Caucasus yet, and if you go vamoosing off there you'll be knifed as sure as fate.' They tried to haul me off to a lot of meetings but I said, 'Oh, yeah?' and skipped. I haven't hitch-hiked in the States for nothing, and Kaganovich himself couldn't stop me when I make up my mind to go some place. They put me through the hoop at Mineralny Vody but I acted dumb, showed them my visum, and told them to go to a warm place. As soon as I got the smell of the hills by Koltso I didn't give a damn for anybody."

Ivan shook his head. "I know your tribe; they are lawless folk and they have no use for those who have left their country. The Party were right: they'll kill you. Unless, of course," he added carelessly, "some one else kills you first."

I glanced anxiously towards his rifle, and changed the subject. "Won't you have something to eat?"

He grasped me warmly by the hand. "That's the best thing anybody's said to me this side of the Atlantic."

This time he had not repeated his speech in Russian, and Ivan said curiously: "What are you saying?"

The agitator winked at me. "That you and the Citizeness are very kind people."

Having learnt wisdom in the matter of chicken I had formed the habit of saving bits of game or *shashelik* from our suppers, and keeping them wrapped up in a handkerchief in my rucksack. I offered my treasures now, and felt sore when the little man pounced upon the fearful *Pravda*-imprinted drumstick thrust forward by Ivan.

"You don't need to take that," I said acidly, "you just whistle it."

He grinned: "I like it that way. When I was a kid my mother hung a chicken a fortnight before she cooked it."

Ivan nodded. "The Citizeness has funny habits; she wants to eat birds almost before they are dead."

I pondered this libel farther up the valley, well away from the piercing aroma of the drumstick, and came to the conclusion that I could frame no case as plaintiff. In the past few weeks I had eaten amazing foods, drunk water from various sources, lived with a complete disregard of my internal organs, and I was fitter than I had ever been before. If I could rid myself of the remnants of civilization and eat that chicken I should be yet more fit. What a pity it was that sufferers from nervous dyspepsia could not be dragged to Soviet Russia: they would be cured in a fortnight.

The agitator finished his meal, smacked his lips . . . and handed Ivan back the bone. I giggled feebly: to-night I would enjoy the gravy from that bone. "Well," he said, "I'll have to be pushing on. But before I go I'll tell you this—you're the best Marxist I've ever met."

I blushed, never having been able to wade through *Das Kapital*. "But I know nothing about *any* politics."

"Why should you? What the hell have politics got to do with it?" He plodded on up the valley, turning occasionally to wave his hand.

"I wonder if he will ever see his brother?"

"No," replied Ivan softly, "he will see very little more at all." He mounted and rode ahead, while I studied his back; a good back, straight, square-shouldered, slim-waisted. For a long period, so it seemed, I had dwelt in company with that back, and its owner had never failed me. Courteous, unswervingly loyal to an *Angleeski* who must have fretted him a lot, he had fathered me through the mountains, slept before my door at nights, attended to my slightest want. With him I had formed a very real friendship, for him I

should always keep an affection deeper than that known between friends in Europe. With Ivan in the Caucasus I had been safer than with any householder in a London suburb; and through the long days of riding we had had many interesting conversations. Yet behind his kindness, behind his courtesy, there was the age-old, defiant spirit of the hills, the "shoot before you speak" motive which always had, and probably always would, govern Russia. Temperamental to a degree he suited his behaviour to the company he was in: treat him right and he was charming; despise his Government (in which he was intensely and most intelligently interested), and he lashed out much as Vladikavkaz lashed when thwarted.

"Were you serious when you said that our late companion would see little more of life?"

The broad back shook with laughter. "Certainly. With that stupid kind, Citizeness, one day there is a smiling sky and the next . . ." A sinewy hand snapped fingers in the air.

"But you wouldn't have shot him—I mean, if I had not been there?"

"Probably I would. People who forget their nationality and make money out of speeches in foreign countries do not deserve to live. . . . Look at the azaleas on the hill-side, Citizeness, are they not beautiful?"

I said "Yes" absently and relapsed into silence. All this bravado about shooting: was it just the outcome, the exaggeration of the childlike Russian mind, or was it really meant? I had to find out. "Tell me, Ivan, why did you not shoot me? I have told you repeatedly that I am not a good Soviet citizen although I love the Russian peoples."

He turned in his saddle. "Ah, there you have it: you love Russia. That scum"—and he jerked his thumb up the valley—"love nothing except themselves. You are foolish in many ways, but you have the good heart."

"Nonsense; I hate your cruelty and I hate your mules."

"Not in your mind."

He rode on serenely. Whacking Vladikavkaz on the rump I cogitated that last remark. *Did* I hate the "eye for an eye" policy practised by the Russian and his beast? At base I did not: there was something logical about the business which appealed to me . . . and that great-great grandfather who had laid an iron way from Leningrad to Moscow had a lot to answer for. . . .

Twenty-four hours later we dipped down into Pjatachek. The band behind the station was playing the Overture to *William Tell*, (eminently suitable after my reactions to Ivan's prowess with the rifle); the band in front of the station was playing *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?* Pjatachek itself was confusion, and a sea of faces watched our progress. The Grand Hotel looked sorrowful and was full of tourists who glanced disdainfully at my nigger-brown legs and arms.

Very awkwardly I said good-bye to Ivan, my guide, mentor, and philosopher. We shared a bottle of wine, but that was poor reward to one who had been so kind. Embarrassed, I fished out a tin of insecticide which he seized with avidity and began to sprinkle over his red sheepskin cap. The fleas popped out in all directions and I left him sitting by the roadside killing live stock. "Better than the superb opener!" he said triumphantly. And crack—crack went the fleas. "Next year, Citizeness, next year!"

I didn't say good-bye to Vladikavkaz; enough was as good as a feast.

But I went up the hill to see Ada M——. "I've been to the Mountains of the Moon: I know now the true meaning of the country."

She was very sick; panting her life away in a series of heart attacks. "You're a damn' fool," she gasped. "Soviet Russia's got you and you won't admit it. Don't forget my messages—and, listen, don't go high-hat over this country."

I didn't. As I left for Mineralny Vody the loud-speaker was still blaring that the "Kislovodsk-Sochi-Black Sea-Express" was due out in a few minutes. The population



HERE A RED FOX

crowded the platform, the couples sang and danced, the children ate ice-cream and tugged at parental skirts, Pjatachek was still crammed with people. But all this excitement meant nothing beside the fact that I had been among the Mountains of the Moon. . . .

Ada was right: Russia had got me—and I couldn't high-hat her if I tried.

I

CHAPTER VI

THE TAIL-END OF EUROPE

I

ONCE again I sat on Mineralny Vody station, but this time I sat in the Intourist kiosk looking out on a grey veil of thunder rain which hid the mountains and the Valley of Delight, and drove the Flowers of Life to sanctuary in a large shed at the far end of the platform. The train for Ordjonikidze was late: it would come in one hour, two hours . . . anyway, it would come sometime. . . .

"In a few minutes," smiled the youth in the kiosk.

I nodded drowsily. The humidity of the atmosphere, after the exhilarating air of the mountains, made me so sleepy that I had the greatest difficulty in keeping my eyes open, so I lay down on the bench, propped my head on the typewriter, and told the youth to wake me when the train came in. Most annoyingly, I could not quite fall asleep, and my cat-naps were broken by a lengthy argument between the Intourist boy and his mother, who had brought him a bowl of *pasta*, gravy, and vegetables for his dinner. He had, it seemed, been offered a better job in Moscow—and what young Russian would not jump at such a chance? "Think, Mamma, I shall see our Stalin driving in and out of the Kremlin, I shall visit Lenin's tomb, I shall go to the Bolshoi theatre!"

Mamma grunted scornfully. He was her Benjamin, her adored, and she wasn't going to have him traipsing off to the capital. What would she do if he were a thousand miles away and she could get no news of him?

"But Mamma . . ." The youth recapitulated the glories of Moscow and began a long description of the advantages he would gain there. Why, he might go to study at the

University, or be taken for the Red Army, or rise to be General Manager of Intourist!

Mamma remained adamant. No son of hers was going to stir from Mineralny Vody.

"But Mamma . . ." The plaintive bleat got on my nerves; so did Mamma's colossal ignorance of her capital city which, from her descriptions, might have been set in the Polar regions. "There is ice in the streets and the wind penetrates your liver."

I struggled into a sitting position. "Can wind penetrate your liver, Citizeness?"

She glared at me. "Assuredly. The cousin of my best friend went to Moscow—two years later he died from cancer of the liver. The wind was to blame."

I thought hazily that perhaps vodka and not wind was the cause, but did not like to say so.

"Well, when I was in Moscow a few weeks ago there was no wind and a temperature of over 80 degrees."

"What does a foreigner know? Besides," she added balefully, "all the churches in Moscow are shut."

So that was the root of the trouble. "Pardon me, Citizeness, several of them are open and very many people still go to them. Surely you know that the Government now allow whoever wishes to go to church?"

"I do not believe it. Mineralny Vody is the only place left in Soviet Russia where one may worship."

"But Mamma . . ."

This time I went to sleep in earnest.

It was two o'clock when the youth shook me awake. "Your train, Citizeness."

We galloped across several sets of rails and I hurled myself at the steps just as the train began to move. The youth threw my baggage after me and screamed something about "Don't forget . . ." but the remainder of his sentence was lost on the wind and I surmised he was only continuing his Moscow argument so paid little attention.

The corridors were packed with hot and exhausted men and women in various stages of undress—pyjamas, dressing-gowns, petticoats, trousers and singlets, trousers without the singlets. Most of them had already been in the train two days and were facing the prospect of another two before reaching Baku. My companions were a very fat Turkish doctor and a neat little Mongol officer, who provided me with a paper fan and a plate of squashed raspberries. The doctor was clad simply in a pair of very dirty striped pyjama trousers, but the Mongol sat erect, his khaki tunic spotless and tightly buttoned.

The dust which rose in clouds from the corridor made me cough and the doctor said severely, "You are bronchial. That is all wrong. In England they cannot treat people properly for bronchial catarrh—such a pity. Now I have a clinic near Erivan where I cure thousands of bronchial cases a year. Here is the brochure on the treatment."

I studied the pamphlet obediently. The treatment seemed most involved and highly unpleasant, and I murmured that my bronchitic tendency was now of the slightest, although it had troubled me many years ago.

"Nonsense," snapped the doctor. "In another five years both your lungs will be smothered in bronchial matter. I can see that you are thoroughly careless about your health, and that will not do at all. Now listen to me: you will come to Armenia and undertake my treatment in a sanatorium on the summit of Mount Aragats."

"*Ararat?*" I ventured.

"Aragats."

"But surely you mean Ararat—Noah and the ark?"

"No, I don't," he roared. "Do you mean to tell me you have never heard of Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia, over 12,000 feet high, or of the beautiful new Meteorological Station the Academy of Science have erected on its summit?"

He looked so cross, and the prospect of being whirled off

to Aragats to undergo a quite unnecessary cure in a place which was a mixture of a sanatorium and a Meteorological Station was so frightening that I tried a red herring. "I have always wanted to see Ararat. It is in Armenia, isn't it?"

"Of course; you will see it from Aragats—but there is little of interest there. What you must see are the mines, the ore and chemical industries, the Davalu limestone quarries from which the Erivan Synthetic Rubber Combine is going to start making rubber."

I grinned at the Mongol. "But I am not interested in mines, Citizen."

"I see you are mentally as well as physically careless. All that will be altered by the time you leave Aragats."

"Have you had your dinner?" interrupted the Mongol.

"No, is there a dining-car?"

This was too much for the doctor. "Fruit is sufficient diet on a long journey. And to eat food cooked on the train is bad, very bad. Your lungs are upset already, why upset your stomach?"

"Nothing upsets my stomach in Russia." I followed the Mongol down the corridor while the doctor trumpeted after us that we would have a whole list of diseases by nightfall.

"An exhausting personality," said the Mongol gravely, "but a very clever man, and remember he is a Turk."

"What difference does that make?"

"An arrogant people. Tell me, where have you come from?"

He was immensely interested in my trip to the mountains, smiled pensively when I confessed that Kharkov confused me, asked me endless questions about my views on the Soviet Union. The sun blazed out as we made an enormous meal of *bortsch*, roast turkey, and ice-cream, and drank tepid *piva*, but even the intense heat did not stop our tongues. He had been stationed on the Polish frontier and was now bound for Turkestan and the Pamirs to explore suitable sites for air bases.

"And some day you may hurtle over Afghanistan and drop bombs on India?"

"Never, I hope. We are an army of defence; not of attack. Besides, we shall have to make tremendous strides with aircraft before such a proposition would be feasible. Tell me, Citizeness, what is England's opinion of the Soviets?"

He was the first Russian I had met who seemed to care about the outside world's opinion, and he was sadly concerned when I told him the average Englishman's ideas about the U.S.S.R. He thought that the Party ought to make more effort to explain their many projects to other countries, and I agreed when he said that although at present this appeared to be a waste of energy it would be a different matter in another twenty years, when the vast resources of the Union were fully developed and world markets might be required for Russian goods. Kindly, intellectual, and shrewd, I enjoyed our conversation so much that three hours passed before we returned to our compartment.

The doctor was asleep, sprawled across his bunk with his mouth wide open, and I heaved a sigh of relief. But no sooner had I lit a cigarette than he sat bolt upright and began a long lecture on the folly of smoking in my bronchitic state. "At Aragats there will be *no tobacco allowed*."

"But I am not coming to Aragats."

"Why?"

I squinted down my nose and said primly that my tour did not include a cure in Armenia.

"That is rubbish. Give me your papers and I will take them to a Government friend of mine in Baku. He will arrange everything for you."

"It is impossible, Citizen. I am very sorry, but I have made out a complete itinerary and I must stick to it."

"What itinerary? Where are you going?"

His cross-examination infuriated me so much that I determined he should not know I was going to Ordjonikidze

. . . and this decision proved my undoing. For the next two hours we played a game of chess in words, I evading all direct information, he pursuing my vague replies with a "check to your king" look in his eye. The Mongol slept peaceably in his corner, the train stopped at several stations, we grew more and more heated and more and more stubborn. Finally he began to check off the places to which I might be going. "Well, we are past Beslan, so that rules out Ordjonikidze. . . ."

I bounded in my seat. "What do you mean?"

He stared at me. "That station we stopped at a few moments ago was Beslan, the junction for Ordjonikidze."

Memory of the Intourist youth's parting shout of "Don't forget . . ." came back to me. He must have been trying to tell me to change at Beslan. This was awful!

"Heavens! What is the next stop?"

The doctor wagged his head. "There is nowhere for an *Angleeski* to wait until Makhach-Kala in Daghestan . . . on the Caspian, you know."

My heart descended into my shoes. "When do we reach there?"

"To-morrow morning perhaps. It depends how late the train is. There is a big glass-blowing factory there," he added comfortingly.

I staggered out in search of the attendant and explained my foolish behaviour. To my surprise he patted me on the back. "That will be quite all right, Citizeness. What is a little matter like forgetting to change trains? Besides, they should have told you at Mineralny Vody. You can go to the hotel in Makhach-Kala and wait for a train back to Beslan."

I thanked him and asked if the extra journeys would be very expensive.

His eyes grew round. "But why pay? We do not treat lost travellers like that in Russia."

It seemed astonishing, but the little man was right. Nobody asked me for a kopek during my two days' trundle

round Daghestan, although my ticket clearly said "Ordjonikidze."

Back in the compartment the Turk had wakened the Mongol and was telling him excitedly all about my dilemma. "Did I not say she would come to Aragats," he announced blithely, "all I have to do now is to keep her in the train until Baku, and take her to my Government friend."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," I said indignantly. "You can't abduct foreigners like that. Also, Tovarisch S—— of the Foreign Office is expecting me in Tiflis and I shall be at least two days late as it is."

The Turk's jaw dropped. "Did you say Tovarisch S——?"

"Yes." At that period I had not yet met the man in question, but the Foreign Office in Moscow had kindly given me a letter of introduction to him and notified him that I would be in the city on a certain date. Apparently, his name spelt magic, for the doctor dropped his hectoring tone at once and suggested I should join him in a bottle of cranberry-juice cordial. Hitching up his deplorable trousers he went to fetch this treat from the dining-car and I remarked to the Mongol that if I heard the word Aragats once more I should burst into tears.

He giggled happily and asked if I would dance with him after supper.

"Dance, on a train?"

"Yes, they will clear the dining-car about eleven o'clock. I have my gramophone with me with the very latest records. Would you like to look at them?"

The first one was *I've got my Captain Working for Me Now*, and the second was *Tea for Two*. The third was the waltz from the *Quaker Girl*. I didn't look any farther in case I found the *Merry Widow*.

We sipped the cranberry-juice and then went along to supper, for which the Turk insisted on paying, although I assured him I had sufficient meal-tickets. "Such a little

thing," he whispered deprecatingly, and even relented so far as to allow me to smoke a cigarette in peace after my meal. It was growing late when we stopped at a big town and I demanded to know why I could not stay there and wait for the next train from Baku. Everybody looked shocked. An *Angleeski* stay the night in Grozny? Such an idea had never been heard of; besides, the place was full of oil wells. I couldn't see what the oil wells had to do with it, but forbore argument.

The dancing was hardly successful. The only space was the narrow aisle between the tables, and the boots of about twenty Red Army men were in the way, and the train swayed and clattered through the night as though determined to reach Daghestan as soon as possible. The atmosphere was thick with cigarette smoke, the windows hermetically sealed, and the temperature well over 90 degrees. The Mongol moved precisely and held me as gingerly as a piece of china, but lurching up and down the confined space clasped to the hairy bosom of the Turk was sheer misery. The only other woman was an engineer from Kiev, a large female who whirled her partner, a tiny soldier, from one end of the car to the other with such vigour that I was terrified lest he crashed through the window. Three Red Army men, having rung the changes between *piva* and vodka the entire evening, suddenly put their feet up on their table and went to sleep, but the rest of the company clapped our efforts valiantly and shouted for another tune every time the record ran down.

It was two o'clock before I crawled into my bunk and secreted in my handbag three large pink tablets which the doctor had insisted I should take before retiring.

If it had not been for the Mongol I should have been carried past Makhach-Kala, because I was still sound asleep when we neared it.

"I could not wake you," he told me. "Hurry, hurry!"

Both he and the doctor sat up in their bunks and watched

me dressing with great interest. "My wife does not wear anything like that." The Turk pointed to my petticoat.

I blushed as I had not done for many years and struggled hastily into my frock. There was no time to wash, or to brush my hair, or even to clean my teeth, for the train was already slowing down. The Mongol descended from his bunk, put my pyjamas and sponge-bag tidily in my case, and locked it. "I will hand your baggage out to you."

We parted eventually with the Turk leaning far out of the window screaming final instructions about bronchitis, its cause and cure.

II

Makhach-Kala station was uninspiring. In contrast to all other Russian stations it suffered a strange dearth of travellers, and it was littered with huge crates containing glass bottles. Two porters sat on a barrow and a funny little hill-woman drew her grey shawl tightly across her face and skipped off when she saw me.

Rather timidly I approached the porters. It wasn't in the least certain that they would speak Russian, and I foresaw a complicated pantomime concerning my ticketless state. "At what time will the train for Beslan start?"

They raised flat, Asiatic faces decorated with bushy black beards, and a mildly astonished expression flickered over the elder one's features. "It is already five hours late from Baku. It may come in this afternoon." He looked at his mate for confirmation, and he echoed, "This afternoon."

At least they spoke Russian, although their accent made their speech hard to follow. "Thank you. Is there an hotel where I can get breakfast?"

They weren't at all sure about that. "What sort of an hotel, Citizeness?"

At the word Intourist they showed glimmerings of intelligence. The Intourist Hotel might be open: on the

other hand, it might not. They entered into a lengthy argument as to whether the blinds had been down or up when they passed it yesterday. I sat down on another barrow and waited patiently. Presently the elder one gave a little jump: "But you came off the train to Baku. Why did you do that? Intourist people go so . . . and so . . . from one place to another. They don't get off trains in Makhach-Kala."

I began my explanation. It was really most dramatic—the story of the lonely foreigner who forgot to change at Beslan and found herself touring Daghestan, a lost and terrified creature. The younger porter was so moved that tears came to his eyes, and the elder one wrung me by the hand. There was no mention of tickets, but they studied my passport with much enthusiasm. An *Angleeski*! Years ago they had met one of the breed, but he had been a very aged man, not a "fine strapping girl" like myself.

I preened myself on the barrow. When you are mahogany coloured, powderless, unwashed, and thirty-eight years old such compliments are sweet.

The porters paused for reflection. Apparently, time had even less value in Makhach-Kala than anywhere else in the Union. At last they spoke simultaneously: "We must take her to the policeman!"

Visions of Russian cells rose in my disturbed mind. Once let the police take a hand and I should be immured in the Makhach-Kala jail for goodness knew how long. "But Comrades, I only want to stay here until the train comes."

"Yes, yes, but you have your passport. No foreigner must keep their passport while resident in a Soviet town. See, Citizeness, I have it in the regulations," he produced a much-thumbed book.

Oh, well . . . ! I trailed behind them to the station yard where a policeman stood, directing the ox-wagons and donkey-carts. "Hi!" they yelled excitedly, "here is an *Angleeski*!"

The policeman was thrilled; three drivers and four shepherds and a crowd of little boys were also thrilled. They gathered round me, poking inquisitive fingers at rather intimate portions of my anatomy and babbling questions. "Never," said the policeman raptly, "have I seen a British passport."

My dramatic story was retold by the elder porter with a wealth of detail it had not possessed in its original version. I felt heroic, embarrassed, and frightened all at once.

"She wants to eat," shouted the younger porter.

The policeman took me by the arm and rushed me across the yard to a café. "There you are." He sat me down at a table in the window and beckoned the waiter. "What will you have, *bortsch*, goose, Pojarsky cutlets?"

I had wanted breakfast, but the idea of a Pojarsky cutlet in the depth of Daghestan attracted me. "So so,"—the waiter scratched his head. "I do not know if there is a chicken killed."

The policeman pointed magnificently to the yard, where twenty or so skinny fowls pecked at the hard earth. "There you are! If you kill one now the Citizeness can have her cutlet within the hour. She *must* have it—see her passport, she is *Angleeski*."

The café rose as one man and clustered round my table. Outside the crowd grew, and children ran hither and thither calling their comrades to come and see the fun. Women leaned from crazy balconies on low white houses and screeched to each other that there was a European woman in the Pogodin café. At least three people made a dash after a luckless hen, which gave out an agonized squawk as the winner screwed its neck.

"That is right," beamed the policeman. "Now, Citizeness, you will stay here and have your food, and I will keep your passport, and when the train comes in the porters will let me know and I shall blow twice on my whistle."

It all seemed very complicated, but I was too exhausted

to worry. "I don't think," I remarked firmly, "that I will have the Pojarsky cutlet after all."

The waiter flapped his hands. "The bird is already being plucked!"

The policeman soothed me. "We cannot allow you to starve yourself, Citizeness. Besides, you are much too thin." Bending down he gave me a playful pinch on the thigh, while the throng rocked with delight at his action.

I felt exactly like a freak in a show.

Fortunately, the oxen and donkeys in the yard had got so inextricably mixed during their drivers' absence that the policeman had to dash away to restore order. But by this time my fame had spread through Makhach-Kala and streams of people came to press their noses against the window by which I sat. Then the Pogosin family trooped in from the kitchen, papa, mamma, and eleven small Pogosins, queer little souls in long dark tunics and knee-breeches, high boots and black fur caps much flatter and wider than those worn in the Elbrus district. They ranged themselves in a line and eyed me solemnly, making remarks in their own language.

With the aid of the waiter as interpreter I complimented papa and mamma on the size and health of their family, and on their cleverness in producing so many sons. To my horror the lady rushed forward and divested the youngest Pogosin of its garments . . . it was a girl. I buried my beetroot-coloured face in the bowl of *bortsch* which had just arrived and refrained from any more pretty speeches.

The morning passed, the crowd grew, Pogosin did a roaring trade, I tried to read a month-old copy of *Izvestia* and to remain oblivious of stares, smells, and prods. It was a pity they did not stick pins into me to see if I was really alive. The policeman blew his whistle so frequently and shrilly that I stopped jumping up and running across to ask him if my train had arrived, and the old waiter kept whispering in my ear, "The Pojarsky . . . in a few minutes."

The Pogosin way of making Pojarsky cutlets was to hack

all meat from the chicken-bones, press it between two plates, sprinkle it lavishly with *Petroushka* and steam it. I came to the conclusion that the deader a bird was the better in Russia, and remembered Ivan's criticism of my tastes. But there was ice-cream—lots of it and very good, until the waiter gave me a graphic description of how it was made from goat's milk. Pogodin would accept no payment for my meal and the waiter translated that it was a pleasure to serve the *Angleeski*, and that the takings had been more in one morning than was usual in a month. Would I not stay in Makhach-Kala? There was a nice room above the stable where I should be most comfortable. "You see," he added confidentially, "the people from the hills will come down to see you, and the glass-blowers on their Rest Day, and the fishermen."

A Roman holiday for Makhach-Kala, in fact.

But all the same I was growing attached to Daghestan, and discussed a possible tour in the distant future with the waiter. There were mountain villages with lovely names, Gunib, Kuli, Medgalis, and the country was probably the least-known corner of Europe. Indeed, it had no right to be in Europe at all, for everything in it, from people to houses, was Asiatic. Behind the flat, white town the mountains rose sheer, not to the snow-caps of my beloved main Caucasian Range but to colossal promontories of rock, that gleamed red and green and steel-blue in the hot sun. Goats and sheep clambered about the lower cliffs, and hillmen and women, shorter and sturdier than their western neighbours, toiled up and down narrow paths with stuff for market. The men were dressed like the little Pogodins; the women had queer, shapeless garments like sacks, and shawls wrapped about their heads as protection against the sun. Primitive folk, they approached towns with diffidence, and the instinct to hide their faces from strangers was still strong. They mistrusted trains, buses, motor-cars, schools, factories, modern buildings, and electricity, but at the same time they

were fascinated by these things and I felt that in a few years' time the Soviets would have made enormous advances with their programme of developing the country. A good thing, undoubtedly, for the people: a sad thing for the few idiots like myself who enjoyed wandering in lands untouched by modernity.

And on the other side of Makhach-Kala, stretching from an azure bay fringed with cypresses, was the Caspian Sea. I made its acquaintance in the early afternoon when the crowds in and outside the café were unendurable for another moment. I walked across to the policeman. No, the train had not come and they had a telegraph message from Derbent, several hours away, that it had not even reached there yet. I had plenty of time—he waved his arm in a comprehensive sweep which took in all the environs of the town—what would I like to do?

“Go swimming.” (One of my minor idiosyncracies is to add to the number of seas, rivers, and lakes in which I have swum.)

“But certainly, Citizeness. Take that street . . . and that street . . . turn sharp left and you are at the *plage*.”

“Beach” was never used in Soviet Russia, I had discovered: always the French *plage*.

“But I must get my bathing-suit out of my case.”

He put his hands on his hips and shouted with laughter. Whoever heard of swimming in anything except your skin? And anyway, the porters had gone to dinner and had locked my baggage securely in the Intourist office.

That was that. The more I thought of the Caspian Sea the more delectable it became. And after all, why shouldn't I swim naked? “Is there any road to the *plage* down which the crowd will not follow me?”

“Certainly, Citizeness. Go into the station—the people are not allowed there without a pass, and besides, they are afraid of trains; go through the goods yard and down the path which leads to the sea.”

I skulked through that station, hiding behind trucks, crawling across tracks on all fours, looking fearfully behind me lest my admirers had defied the law and picked up my trail. This business of being a freak was very tiring. But down the sandy path bordered by cotton-grass I caught a glimpse of turquoise and felt happier. Another few yards and the Caspian lay, shining and lovely, before me. No wonder water was at a premium in Makhach-Kala when they had this glory at their very door.

A tall cypress provided a convenient disrobing-room. Back in the town the crowd would be clamouring about the Pogosin café. . . . I did not care; I was alone with the sea which was fed by the Volga, the Kuma, and the Kura, the sea which lapped both European and Asiatic coasts. Swimming in its warm, limpid water I had a sudden, fantastic notion of going on and on under the brilliant sun until I reached Krasnovodsk, where I might take train for Ashkabad and Samarkand, link up with the mysterious Turk-Sib railway, emerge triumphant at Vladivostok. But even in Russia one needed a minimum of clothing for such a journey, and even in Russia bodily strength gave out before one had swum five miles. Regretfully I turned back to the deserted shore, sun-bathed on the sand, dressed and marched boldly up to the town by the streets the policeman had first suggested. Freak or no freak, I was at least clean and refreshed.

My advent into the station yard raised a chorus of jubilation, and I learnt from the waiter that the population, baulked of their prey, had shown every sign of looting the Pogosin establishment, with the result that my free dinner had been bitterly regretted. Now that I had reappeared from limbo, so to speak, there was nothing I might not have. Would I like vodka, *piva*, tea, or Daghestan wine?

I chose tea, and inquired of the policeman if the train was anywhere near due. Well, it had reached Derbent . . . but one never knew what might happen to it between that

town and Makhach-Kala. Meantime the popularity of the Pogosin café went up by leaps and bounds as news of my return reached the inhabitants. . . .

I sat enthroned, quiescent, and treated the Pogosin young to ice-creams.

Night fell on Makhach-Kala and still the pilgrimage to see the *Angleeski* continued. Swarthy glass-blowers, their daily work finished, swarmed in the café. The supply of *piva* ran out and even the smallest Pogosin trotted to and fro with trays of provender. Royalty must feel like this, I thought, and played with the idea of sending Intourist at Ordjonikidze a wire saying I was planning an Empire in Daghestan. Every one was friendly—and very inquisitive, so I tucked my money and papers down the front of my frock and let the women and children amuse themselves with the contents of my handbag. A handkerchief pleased them enormously—they used fingers. Powder and puff in a little case set with mirrors awed them so much that they put it on a table covered with a clean cloth, and walked round worshipping it from a distance. Probably such adulation went to my head, for I gave Mamma Pogosin my lip-salve as a gift, but not all my interpretations through the waiter could dissuade her from adorning her nose with it.

Oh, yes, I was enjoying Daghestan. My downfall came shortly after midnight, when the policeman rushed in to say that the train would arrive “in a few minutes.” Recklessly I accepted a glass of the local wine from a glass-blower and gulped it down. Most horridly, there was suddenly no table on which to put my glass, no crowd to smile at, no Pogosins to pat on the head. Makhach-Kala spun round and round in my bemused brain and three policemen appeared instead of one. “Citizeness, your train!”

A remnant of sanity helped me to collect my belongings, thank the Pogosins for their kind hospitality, shake hands with the waiter and totter across the yard. “Good-bye, *Angleeski*!” yelled the crowd, and I waved a feeble paw.

"You should not have come so soon," said the elder porter severely. "The train will not be here for an hour yet."

I sank on to a barrow and reflected morosely that royalty were never treated in such cursory fashion.

It was 3 a.m. when the train trundled in. By that time the mists of Daghestan vineyards were dissolving and I was able to retrieve my passport from the policeman and to thank him for my amazing day. "Next year, Citizeness, you will visit us *properly*?" The elder porter elbowed his way on board, told the attendant I was the distinguished visitor he had sent telegrams about, and dumped me in a very grand compartment.

"Good-bye, good-bye! Next year!"

As the train began to move the attendant came and stood in the doorway. "You like our International Sleeping-cars?"

I blinked at him. "But I travel 'soft' as a rule."

He was exquisitely official. "We had our instructions, Citizeness."

Heaven knew who had issued them, but the result was stupendous. I had a two-berth compartment to myself with a natty wash-basin which let down from the wall. My last conscious thought was: "Could it have been the policeman?"

Exactly sixteen hours later we chuffed into Beslan. Of the journey I knew nothing, for I slept until noon, awakened for two glasses of tea and a wash, slept again until the attendant roused me. . . .

But I had been to Daghestan.

III

A gaunt individual in a grey suit awaited me on the platform and informed me in a strong Yankee accent that he was glad I had turned up safe and sound. "But I wouldn't have started worriting yet awhile; I guessed you could keep your head."

"But you've never even seen me before?"

"Mineralny Vody rang up—the little fellow there was in an awful state because he'd forgotten to tell you to change. But he said you'd stood up to his mother, and as I know that lady I didn't fret. Say, where *did* you get to?"

"Makhach-Kala. And what are you, an American, doing in Intourist?"

He chuckled. "Bless you, I'm an Ossetian just back after twenty years in the States. Come on, the automobile's waiting."

"I thought there was a train?"

"The last one went two hours ago."

We climbed into a Ford, which the Ossetian sent leaping over the rough track. Ordjonikidze, he told me, was only thirty-five miles away. In the first mile we killed a hen, narrowly escaped running over an old woman and a couple of pigs, jolted so frantically that I hit my head twice on the struts of the cape hood. Thirty-four more like that and I should be a mental case. The Ossetian merely grinned, shoved his trilby hat a bit farther back on his shaven head, and stepped on the accelerator. To our right the main Caucasus piled up, their snowy sides glimmering in the dusk, and beside the track ran a bubbling river. Even in the twilight the wild marshy lands that stretched to the feet of the mountains showed a crimson tint as they were covered with ragged- robin in full bloom.

"This automobile ain't got no lights," said the Ossetian. "But I guess the moon will see us through."

Bump, rattle, bang . . . went the Ford. Despite my joy at seeing my beloved Caucasus once more, I wished I had stayed in Daghestan with the Caspian Sea and a people who detested motor-cars.

"Forty-eight hours I waited in Beslan"—the Ossetian's voice was dreamy.

Suddenly I felt ashamed. Owing to my stupidity this wretched man had waited two days and nights for me to appear. "I'm so sorry, it was unforgivable of me."

"Shucks, I had a nice rest, slept in the car and had a lot of *piva*. I've got a good job, mind you, but living under any sort of authority gets me down. You can't change me a ten-dollar bill for two fives, can you?"

I had some dollars, but felt cautious. The ten-dollar note might be phoney, for all I knew, and I didn't see what use two fives would be to a Soviet citizen (he had taken out his papers six months before). Noticing my hesitation he said, "It's this way. I smuggled some dollars into Russia, and I've saved more since by selling roubles to tourists. One of these days I'm going to get so goldarned sick of staying in one place that I'll just beat it . . . and notes of small denominations are far more useful to me."

"But you can't beat it out of Soviet Russia?"

"And why not? What's wrong with the Persian border or the Oxus?"

I asked him if he were disappointed in the U.S.S.R., and he told me quite simply that he thought they had done miracles for Russia. It was just that he couldn't live under a system. "I've seen my folks and they're all well and happy; now I want to be off again. The only reason I took out papers was that they wouldn't let me in without them."

Having sympathy with *wanderlust*, I gave him two five-dollar bills and accepted his ten.

Somehow the Ford crashed its way to Ordjonikidze, and as we wriggled through its dusty streets the Ossetian told me its history. "It was a great fort in Tsarist days; all the raids on the Caucasian peoples were organized from it and its position was immensely important because it guarded the entrance to the Terek valley so that the troops could stop any advance of the Georgians or Ossetians into Russia proper. They've renamed it after Ordjonikidze, but its real name was Vladikavkaz."

I jumped. Was that the ghost of a mule galloping ahead of the car?

The city, I was told, had grown enormously under the

Soviets. It now boasted tram-cars, great new buildings, lots of factories and electric generating plants; but on that first evening with the moon radiant in the sky, I got the impression of a typical old town, Eastern in character, with low houses of white, pink, and yellow; people squatting in doorways or on the crude pavements; children, hens, dogs, cats, pigs, and goats tumbling about in the dusty roads. Suddenly we swirled round a corner, missed a tram by inches and swept up the main boulevard to the hotel. The change was astonishing. Arc-lamps glowed, electric signs twinkled, people poured out of the theatre, more people strolled on the pavements looking at attractive shop-windows. In a few hundred yards we had travelled about four centuries.

I have since met people who reviled the hotel at Ordjonikidze. They said it was dirty, insanitary, badly run, full of fleas and bad food. My own impression was exactly the opposite. After Pogosin's café and my experiences in the Mountains of the Moon it seemed to me on a par with the Ritz. There were no visitors except myself, my room was immense, the manageress extremely kindly. And my supper was nectar and ambrosia. It was served in the garden, in a tiny summer-house lit with fairy-lights, and it consisted of blue trout and little sweet wild strawberries, while the *piva* (local brewed) tasted like honey in the mouth.

Afterwards the manageress took me to the park, where I was thrilled to see the usual Tsarist notice preserved on a plaque on the gates, "No soldiers or dogs admitted." But now the Red Army and their sweethearts streamed through the turnstiles unmolested, and dogs seemed as prevalent as in Kharkov. Paths bordered with sub-tropical plants were full of strolling couples, Japanesque little bridges crossed the streams which fed a large curving lake, a band played softly in the distance. We took a boat and rowed out to an island where *shashelik* was cooked by bearded hillmen in a funny little restaurant, and here we had tea and gazed at the

reflections of the multi-coloured lights in the water. Only for a moment did I falter in my enjoyment of Ordjonikidze, and that was when I was shown two wretched Caucasian bears, mangy and thin, that were penned in a horrible, smelly enclosure not nearly big enough for them. "We are so proud of our bears."

I wanted to hammer the bars down and let the poor creatures go free, to run back to their mountains and their rocks. The contrast between these miseries and my small friend by Elbrus was too appalling, and I said so. "But, Citizeness, they are only bears."

It was no good arguing with a Slav about cruelty to wild animals.

Next day I was told I must climb the minaret which rose, green and slender, from the centre of the city. The view from it was wonderful and on such a clear day I should see Kasbek. Inside the minaret was a spiral staircase of iron, very steep, very narrow. The atmosphere was stuffy, and only a faint light filtered in through slits in the wall. I climbed . . . and climbed . . . and when my limbs ached so that I could not manage another step the guide said brightly, "Not quite half-way yet, Citizeness."

After an eternity I stepped out on to a small circular platform and got such a shock that I nearly fell to my death in the street beneath. We seemed to be floating high above the city, floating towards the south-west where Kasbek stood proudly in all his shining magnificence, sharp-etched against an azure sky. I spreadeagled my arms on the wall behind me and edged carefully round, full circle. No matter in which direction you looked the peaks of the main range flashed in the morning sun, a ring of incredible brilliance surrounding the city. "Some people," said the guide nonchalantly, "get dizzy up here."

I retreated into the minaret. Not for worlds would I have told him that after a brief five minutes I felt I could not stay on that platform an instant longer. Negotiating

the stairs coming down, I cursed myself heartily. Why hadn't I conquered my dizziness and stayed up all morning, feasting my eyes on what was, most likely, the grandest sight in Europe?

But old Ordjonikidze lured me. The rest of the day I wandered about its dusty streets, talking to the children who built sand-castles in the middle of the road, saw them demolished by a passing wagon or motor, cheerfully started again only for their handiwork to meet with the same annihilation. A small boy was laboriously making flat cakes out of dung, "for fires," he said. He was eight years old, could speak Ossetian, Russian, and a smattering of German, knew the first fifteen theorems of Euclid, and more about world geography than I did. And he spent his holidays making dung bricks for his mother's fire!

The women were tall, finely made, dark-skinned. As usual they invited me into their homes, where I sipped endless glasses of tea and listened to their life-stories. They were contented folk, tremendously keen on educating themselves mentally, yet quite happy to remain in their primitive homes. That was a point about these Soviet peoples which interested me particularly. Full of schooling, of a desire for culture (nearly all under fifty attended classes for some branch of learning), they did not develop the "swelled head" so common among other races who have risen suddenly in knowledge. It never occurred to them to be dissatisfied with physical conditions, to query their lack of decent clothing, to envy visitors who possessed more advantages than themselves.

Sitting on a three-legged chair on a mud floor, watching an alert Ossetian cook a midday meal for her family, I thought that if this were Communism then it was the best thing that had come out of a war-ridden world. But was it Communism? Theoretically, it was a Marxian doctrine: practically, it was a *bourgeoisie* with the harsh corners rounded off: basically, it was the only possible way of

living for Russia, whose Asiatic soul bore but a thin lacquer of European civilization. A piglet strolled up to me, snuffed my legs, snorted in derision. Two children clattered in, full of the camp they were about to depart for on the Black Sea coast. A cow put its head round the door, mooed plaintively, and disappeared. "And next year," said the mother, "I shall study philosophy."

Why study what you already knew?

In the late afternoon I met the local priest, a gentle old man in a shabby *soutane*, green with age and splitting at the seams.

"You will come to see my church?"

Pigs rooted in the coarse tufted grass of the churchyard as we walked up to the broken door. Inside the pews were worm-eaten, in place of stained-glass windows empty spaces gaped at the sky, most of the *ikons* had been removed from their shrines. "So," sighed the old man, "desecration was common after the Revolution." Then he chirped up, "But my parishioners still come to church, even the young ones. Holy Russia cannot do without God."

He was the most pathetic person I had seen in Russia. Kept by the meagre contributions of food brought to him by grateful people, he lived—somehow. He was suffering for the greed of Archimandrites and fellow-priests, but in himself he was a tender, timid soul bewildered by the volcano of hatred that had overwhelmed his beloved church. Seventy years old, he swept and garnished his shrines, held services, plodded through his parish bringing spiritual comfort to his people. For him there were no State benefits, no sanatoria, no pensions; yet in his isolation he was happy. "In ten, twenty, fifty years Russia will revert to her true faith."

I thought it most unlikely that the present Flowers of Life would turn to the Greek Orthodox Church, but I did not say so. His dreams meant life to him.

"What of Rasputin?"

He clasped his hands on his chest. "He was antichrist.

Once I saw him, in the corridor of a general's house in Vladikavkaz. His eyes were terrible, devilish; they burnt through you. He was no monk! He used the Church as a lever to power."

As we came out of the churchyard several women entered, baskets of eggs and butter hidden beneath their shawls. The priest glanced at me a little furtively, "You will not say anything, Citizeness?"

"No, certainly not; besides, the State allows you to keep your church open."

He seemed a little doubtful whether the State would approve his butter and eggs, but thanked me profusely for the few roubles I gave him "towards his funds", and the women crossed themselves as I passed.

IV

Departure from Ordjonikidze was a difficult affair. The "auto-bus" renowned from Vladivostok to Negoreloje could not make the journey over the Georgian Military Highway to Tiflis, a matter of some hundred and twenty miles, because Mount Kasbek had been in a violent temper and had thrown cascades of snow and several tons' weight of boulders on to the bridge which spanned the Terek River, with the result that the bridge had been ruined and the roadway demolished. "Of course, there's a lorry," said the American-Ossetian.

I replied that a lorry would suit me far better than a motor-bus full of tourists.

"Wa-al, there ain't no tourists, but if you don't mind we'd like to get you to Tiflis somehow. You're very late on your schedule as it is."

I had a mild fit of hysteria at anybody talking of "schedule" in Russia, and plumped for the lorry. "When does it start?"

"Six in the morning."

That was easy. Wake up at seven-thirty and give the lorry "a few minutes." Fortified by this thought I went to the island restaurant in the park with three engineers and their wives, and got to bed at three a.m., to be awakened by the most fearful cat-calls beneath my window. "Citizeness, the lorry!"

Such punctuality unnerved me. Cantering downstairs I snatched a handful of strawberries from the manageress and rushed into the yard. The lorry was a sad proposition. Supported on solid—and synthetic—tyres, it displayed a list while at rest which augured ill for the mountainous drive that lay before it. A red-headed youth in a tattered shirt and ancient flannel trousers was busy setting slats of wood in the back for seats, and round the courtyard drooped a sailor, a woman who was already preparing to be car-sick, her melancholy husband and two hillmen in their black coats who were busy shaking the fleas from their fuzzy caps. My case and typewriter looked oddly small beside rolls of carpet, mattresses, heaps of pots and pans, and great bundles of clothes.

"Come on," said the Ossetian, "you go in front beside the driver."

In vain I protested that I preferred the back: it was unthinkable that an *Angleeski* should travel in the back of a lorry. Perched in the high cab I nibbled my strawberries and grew ever more conscious of an aching void in my inside. "When will we start?" I asked the red-headed youth.

"God knows," he returned piously.

Ignoring the American-Ossetian I descended and made for the garden-hut where they prepared the food. "I want breakfast quickly, please. Two eggs, tea, and black bread."

Eggs were awkward, very awkward. The hens of Ordjonikidze had a habit of laying them in such queer places that it took a long time to find them. But caviare—Astrakhan caviare?

Before I finished my strawberries a large pot was set in front of me. I ate until the driver blew on his fingers, when I shamelessly appropriated both pot and spoon and made a dash for the lorry. By this time the sick lady had entirely succumbed and was stretched out on a deal board with her head, carefully wrapped in a copy of *Pravda*, laid on her husband's lap, while the sailor and the hillmen were indulging in a free fight for the remaining seats. The red-headed youth cranked the engine with a superhuman effort that nearly broke his wrist, cried out that we were off, and leapt into the driving-seat before the vibration had a chance to die away.

I went on eating caviare as we pounded along the flat road to Balta.

The morning mist hung thick over the plain, and I inquired anxiously if we should really see the Georgian Highway at its best, whereat the driver nodded vigorously and said that he had never known more promising weather, "except for the Terek, except for the Terek."

Peering down at the foaming, angry water which splashed the roadside I wondered how on earth we were ever going to get to Tiflis, but as we swung through Balta and began to climb through dense forests of pine and fir I lost my fears and snuffed the mountain air. Caviare and strawberries might be a queer breakfast, but they helped one appreciate the Caucasus.

The driver waved his hand to the left, and we gave a sickening lurch on the very lip of Terek Gorge. "Ili Peak," he said remotely; then he gave another wave to the right, "Lysasa." It was impossible to see these mountains because mist wreathed them from five hundred feet upwards, but I thanked him politely for his information.

Amid groans from the lady in the back we whirled on, multi-coloured granite cliffs overhanging the road, and the Terek roaring furiously in his canyon. "Look at that," yelled the driver above the din, "that is the Jerakhov

Fortress, where the Tsarist troops used to guard the entrance to the valley." I gazed at the frowning building and pictured the scene there must have been when the Cossacks tore down the banks of the Armkhi River to the Terek in pursuit of hill-tribes. What chance had they had, those men with antiquated rifles, against the might of Imperial Russia?

The Daryal Gorge closed about us, grim and grey, and the cliffs almost met above our heads. On the parapet which served as faint protection against the Terek flood, a Caucasian lay full length, his horse tethered to a stubby bush beside him. "A road-worker," said the driver, "he has come from far in the hills and is having his siesta."

"But it looks so unsafe? If the river rises any more he will be swept away?"

The answer was a laugh. No Caucasian was ever hurled into Terek River.

Up to now rock roses and iris and gentian had softened the granite walls of the gorge, but presently these vanished as we climbed, and the sunless defile became a menacing place of dark stone and darker shadow. Even the mountain trees and shrubs were left behind, and as the mist lifted, a keen wind whistled past us. "Very soon," shouted the driver, "we will see the mountains."

Sure enough, the gorge widened suddenly, and dazzling peaks formed our horizon. From their snowy ridges waterfalls gushed, bringing in their train streaks of white stone flung down by the giants in their winter wrath. On the lower slopes the Caucasian sheep scrambled, and in the valley which opened out before us the flowers sprang again in beauty. "And now," panted the driver, "we come to our destiny."

He sounded so sombre that I tucked the remains of the caviare pot behind me and stared anxiously ahead. Behind us the sailor still fought with the hillmen and the woman still groaned in her husband's lap. Not for them the grandeur of the Caucasian Range, the chill awe of the

Daryal Gorge, the panorama of loveliness set forth by the Mountains of the Moon. As we plunged into a narrower and more fierce defile their agitation reverberated from the rocks and Terek growled in reply.

Two miles farther on our destiny emerged from the shadows with a startling suddenness. A group of shepherds gathered on the left bank of the gorge were watching some workmen run a crude suspension bridge across the torrent. A hundred yards of road seemed to have slipped into the river, because our driver had to pull up and bawl to us all to advance on foot. Even as I crept cautiously along, clinging to the cliff-face, pieces of roadway slid with a hissing sound over the precipice, and the remains of the original bridge were tossed high in the air by the angry river.

An old man with a sack of potatoes on his back lumbered towards me. "Baggage, baggage, I will take it across for you!"

I nodded towards the lorry and walked on to the bridge, wondering how *I* was going to get across, much less the case and typewriter. To my dismay an agile youth, who couldn't have had even a bowing acquaintance with a nervous system, was running to and fro on the frail, swaying contraption of rope and boarding, screwing nuts into place with a spanner. I had often watched the same process on Russian railways, where they employed each stay in a station by tightening wheels and axles liable to break loose at any moment, but a train was a thing familiar: this bridge was anything but . . .

A man in a red sheepskin cap rushed forward and seized my hand. "It is easy, Citizeness!"

I held back. "But my baggage; I must wait for that."

We didn't have to wait long. Up the remains of the road staggered my old man, potatoes over one shoulder, case over the other, typewriter swinging perilously from his right hand. He trotted ahead of us and on to the bridge, while my jovial companion informed me that "it has not been used yet; perhaps it will not bear the weight."

At each step the balance between case and potatoes altered and at least six times I thought that my belongings were going to be sacrificed to Terek; but by dint of much shaking of the shoulders and swearing, their bearer reached the far side in safety.

Now it was my turn. The Caucasian grasped me round the waist and frisked me on to the bridge before I had regained my breath. "Careful, Citizeness, careful!" Shepherds and workmen on both sides of the gorge clapped their hands in glee as I slithered painfully on the wet boards and the spray dashed up in my face and my companion did a sort of can-can to make the bridge swing a little more violently.

On the other bank I drew a deep breath and handed out cigarettes all round, but I was allowed no peace, for the lorry-driver had been signalling to sheepskin-cap that I must take my seat in the amazing-looking vehicle which was drawn up a few yards ahead. In it were two truculent rams, three noisy goats, and a crate of chickens, all bound for Tiflis market . . . from the front seat the smell was terrific. The luggage, of course, was tossed negligently among the live stock. I watched a goat chewing the typewriter handle and turned away unable to bear any more.

The lorry-driver was having fun with his other passengers. The sick lady refused flatly to attempt the bridge, and the sailor and his enemies came to blows on the edge of the precipice. Above the roar of the river I caught such words as "honour" . . . "enemy" . . . "Tsarist dog," and hoped that no frightful tragedy would result. I need not have worried; being Russians, they suddenly made friends, shook hands, and pranced over the bridge without mishap.

Now we were four, but we had no driver. Inquiry among the shepherds brought the reply that "he wasn't awake yet," and a small boy was sent chasing up the hill-side to find him. The old man with the potatoes came and sat on the running-board and aired his grievances. He did not

like the Soviets, they were too new-fashioned for him altogether. And they had taken all zest from life, for what was there to do when every one was friendly with every one else? The old days, ah, those were the ones! Skirmishing with Cossacks when you knew every inch of the hills and could trick them into bogs where they floundered helplessly and made good targets, that was a splendid game.

"But even if you shot a few Cossacks it didn't help you?"

He raised a vacant face: "I did not want any help: I only wanted to kill."

Two young men strolled up. "Is he grumbling as usual, Citizeness? He is a bloodthirsty wretch, but harmless." They made the motions of drinking, and I said, "Vodka?" "No, no, potato spirit. Did you not see the sack on his back?"

So the load which I had imagined to be food for a family was merely fodder for an illicit still!

The old man nudged me. "Have you five roubles, Citizeness? Remember, I carried your baggage across that dangerous bridge."

That gave me a further jolt. Never before in Soviet Russia had anybody demanded a tip. The young men elbowed him off, telling him to go home and be quiet, but my heart smote me. "Let him have the money; it is such a small sum."

One of them faced me squarely. "Have you any idea what he makes during July and August when the tourists come this way? To all of them he tells the same story—for his nephew speaks English and comes with him then as interpreter—and they give him five, ten, fifteen roubles: he is one of the richest men in the district."

Memory had grown creaky regarding books, but I now had distinct recollection of this old pirate playing the chief part in some writer's description of the Georgian Highway. So far as I could remember he was there represented as "the

soul of Russia." The nephew must have been a marvellous interpreter.

Meantime we grilled pleasantly in our new . . . well, it wasn't a lorry, and it wasn't a cape-cart, and it wasn't anything that I'd ever seen, but presumably it secreted an engine somewhere underneath its curious façade. In the back, goat vied with ram, but I produced the remains of caviare, plus spoon, which I had carried diligently from the lorry, and gave it to the sailor and the hillmen, who finished it spoonful about, and a small brown boy materialized out of nowhere and offered me lumps of gold quartz, pieces of rock crystal, and silver nuggets. I bought a fine collection for fifty kopeks, but hesitated over a string of trout until the sailor suggested we should split them, re-string them, and hang them over the windscreen to dry in the sun. Having doubts as to when we should reach Tiflis—if ever—and feeling that dried trout were better than no trout I bought sixteen half-pounders for a rouble. We were all rather fishy by the time we had made them into a neat row which flapped merrily on the windscreen, but we had definitely lessened the pungent aroma of ram and goat.

Suddenly a figure exactly like Mephisto popped out of a mud hut farther up the hill and ran towards us. "Tovarisch!" he yelled dramatically, "I am your driver."

We chorused that the pleasure was ours, and we hoped he had had a nice sleep, and would it be possible to start soon?

"Yes, yes, yes!" He disappeared from view underneath the vehicle, and astonishing sounds came without warning from its inside. Presently clouds of smoke shot up from what might have been the radiator and Mephisto emerged, sooty, but cheerful. "Take your seats," he chanted.

There was a little bother over the seats. The red-headed lorry-driver rushed across the bridge and explained that the *Angleeski* must sit in front, whereupon the sailor seized him by the neck, and I said hurriedly that I was very fond of

animals and didn't mind in the least sitting in the back. Mephisto, a born diplomatist, chivvied the hillmen in beside the live stock, and said airily that there was plenty of room for three in front. "That is a holy lie,"¹ I remarked severely as we piled in, myself in the middle, right in the way of a prehistoric gear-lever.

He shook with laughter and gave me a dig in the ribs which sent me cannoning into the sailor.

We seemed ready to start when it was discovered that lots of baggage was still piled on the roadside. The sailor cursed, the hillmen snorted, Mephisto got out and began a moving speech, "Tovarischi, I implore you, your baggage will be safe. It will be conveyed to Tiflis in another motor and it will be in Rustaveli Prospect before we are."

Nobody believed him. The baggage must go with them, or else they and it would remain perched on the bank of Terek River. Mephisto howled, wept, stamped, and swore: his audience were unimpressed. For half an hour the battle raged. . . . I went to sleep.

I awakened to find the red-headed lorry-driver clasping my limp hand. "All is well, Citizeness, good-bye and good luck."

He jumped off the running-board as our vehicle started with a kick from the gear-lever which nearly disabled me for life. Turning round to wave to him I saw, to my consternation, that my typewriter and case had joined the pile of baggage. "But I must have these, I must. . . ."

Mephisto laid a large paw on my knee. "They will be in Rustaveli Prospect before you are. They will go in a beautiful motor-car, ah, such a *superb* motor-car!"

Our own horror was jolting so much that I could scarcely speak, but I managed to stutter out that if the other car was "so superb" it seemed grossly unfair that I could not join my baggage and journey to Tiflis in peace.

"Oh, no, Citizeness"—his voice was shocked. "*Anything*

¹ A white lie.

might happen to you in that car: you must stay beside me."

The sailor spoke suddenly, "They are bad men, these Caucasians. "They thief, commit rape, murder . . ."

Remembering Ivan and his kindly fellow-men in the mountain villages, I grew wrathful and launched into an argument which lasted until we reached the end of Daryal Gorge and the tumbledown grey walls and towers which, in the old days, had defended the pass against marauders. "Look," cried Mephisto, "there is the Castle of Queen Tamara, the great Georgian Queen."

The ruins of her fortress towered menacingly on a huge cliff hundreds of feet above the rushing river, and I shivered as I stared, for Tamara had been a super-Catherine the Great, wooing men with honeyed words and then flinging them, with Amazonian zeal, into Terek's abyss after a night of love. Legends of this woman abounded in the Caucasus and I had heard many different versions of her history from hillmen.

We puffed on into a sweet, high valley, and to our right the chasm of the Kabakh River unfolded, Mount Kasbek rearing his conical peak at its far end. The soft mists of early morning had vanished and he shone triumphant, a great sugar-loaf piercing the sky. He was a mere seven miles away, this snowy giant on whom Prometheus had lain in torture, and his majesty was a thing not lightly to be forgotten. In the chasm were blocks of ice, boulders, snow-drifts, reminders of the fierce rage of two days ago when he had hurled them against the puny strength of men who fondly imagined their road could stand up to his might.

Mephisto, however, treated this view of Kasbek as a conjuring trick especially worked by him for my benefit. "Tovarisch!" he roared, "we will stop here while the Citizeness explores the chasm."

The sailor joined me, and together we picked our way over rocks until my foot slipped and I yelled as icy slush embraced

my right leg. Then I subsided on to a granite boulder while the sailor chipped pieces of crystal and quartz from the avalanche. Opposite me, right in the middle of Terek flood, was the enormous mass known as the Ermolov Rock which Kasbek, in a moment of unusual caprice, had thrown into the valley over a hundred years before. That time it had taken man two whole years to repair the results of his wild anger.

"And now," said Mephisto thoughtfully when we returned to the car. "*Pronessi Gospodi.*"

That phrase, from the mouth of a Soviet citizen, gave me to ponder, for it meant "May the Lord carry us through," and I wondered if more bridges had been swept away, or if our vehicle showed yet more signs of imminent disruption. I felt relieved upon learning that this was the name given to a short tunnel on the road ahead which followed a gorge known as the "Devil's Gate," and as we trundled through the shadow and drove out into the sunlight we came to full knowledge of the main Caucasian Range. Immense, glittering, pure and clean, with an aura of brightest blue surrounding their peaks, these exquisite mountains rose on either side of our road.

At Kasbek station, where climbers begin the ascent to the glaciers of Chashski and Devdorak, we stopped for a meal of red wine and black bread. The sailor, the hillmen, and Mephisto ate chicken—I refrained.

"What about the woman who was so sick she could not cross the suspension bridge?"

Mephisto gnawed a bone. "So silly," he remarked reprovingly, "so very silly. She wanted to see her mother at Kutais, and now she will have to stay in Ordjonikidze because of her foolish fear of a little bridge. Her mother will die, and she will weep . . . but no matter, we do not wish for such women in Russia."

Perversity egged me on. "Do you then want women like Queen Tamara?"

He raised his glass as though to toast the ghosts of dear, dead creatures who hit a happy medium in femininity. "Heaven forbid, Citizeness. All I ask for in women is common sense."

"All I ask for," said the sailor gallantly, "is romance."

The hillmen looked up complacently. "We like our women like elephants in Tiflis."

Having weighed myself in Ordjonikidze, only to discover that I had gained about eighteen pounds, I felt a little temperamental. Elephants, indeed!

With the chicken bones securely wrapped in newspaper we trotted back to the car, the sailor and myself jocularly exhorting each other to climb to Kvent-Mta, on the summit of which mountain the derelict monastery of Tsminda-Sameda still clung. Once upon a time, when war raged in the valley, the kings had brought their treasures to this fastness for safe keeping and, as the sailor aptly remarked, "who knows what loot may have been left there?" But Mephisto had no patience with such absurd projects. "Tiflis," he said sourly, "Tiflis," and bundled us back into our uncomfortable seats. We laughed and plied him with the wild strawberries we had gathered on the edges of the lower Daryal Gorge, while the hillmen scuffled with each other in the back, and the smell of goat and ram polluted the clear air. Mephisto sucked appreciatively, but muttered that the worst part of our climb was still to come, and that we must "all be prepared for the worst."

I began solemnly, "Once upon a time there was a beautiful motor-car, a *superb* motor-car, which could take baggage to Rustaveli Prospect quicker than any passenger car could make the journey. But the funny thing was that even on the slopes of the Kavارجin Mountain the old passenger car was still forging ahead. . . ."

No Russian can resist a story which begins "Once upon a time." "Stop!" yelled Mephisto, "Stop! Citizeness, I implore you, listen to me." He embarked on a lengthy tale

about the Khevski Gorge and the fortress of Sioni, through which we had just passed, and his words were so convincing that I forgot all about both danger and baggage until we reached Kobi, and left the most difficult part of our journey behind us.

All Russians were good chess-players: Mephisto was a genius.

How our vehicle managed it I do not know, but somehow she zigzagged over the saddle of the Krestovaya Mountain—which meant that she crossed the Main Caucasian Range at an altitude of some 7,000 feet. We were far above the timber-line, and the snowfields glistened in the sun on either side of the highway, while before us Gudaur came into view, giving promise of other, more tender, views to come. A queer place, this Gudaur, set on the edge of a precipice which fell sheer to a green and wooded valley below, but from it one saw the pyramid of Esikom, the sharp silhouette of Khorizar and, grouped about this, the six other peaks which formed that monument to Russian superstition, the Mountains of the Seven Brothers. And from Gudaur also, gazing back in the direction from whence we had come, the kings of the range, from Kasbek to Elbrus, hung like a chain of diamonds on the rosy neck of their granite cliffs.

Sprawled full length above the precipice I looked down at the White Aragva River that wound, a thin silver ribbon, through the fertile lands 6,000 feet beneath. From the vineyards that seemed tiny squares criss-crossed with dots, craggy rocks with tiny villages perched on their spurs rose so steeply that one could not believe life existed upon them until one saw the smoke-rings drifting from each group of buildings, and pygmy figures toiling up the miniature paths which led to them.

Mephisto came and knelt beside me. "For the past ten years there has been no need for the Aragva folk to hide themselves in these villages, but the Soviets cannot move them. 'Some day,' they say, 'we may need our fortresses

again.' And they may be right," he sighed gustily down the back of my neck; "one never knows."

Cupping my hands in a small waterfall that spouted near by, I drank the sparkling water and hoped for peace in the valley, and also for the continuance of life in those queer eyries on the cliffs. Set hillmen used to dwelling at such an altitude and such an angle in a delectable, low-lying village, and they would die of sheer misery.

We began the descent to Mtskhét, and the hillmen chose this moment to begin yet another fight in the back. To the accompaniment of their curses, Mephisto's swears, and the sailor's songs, we lurched wildly round hair-pin bends, through waterfalls, over bumps that sent us perilously near the precipice side. To start with I was terrified, but the blaze of golden azalea on the hill-sides was so lovely that I sat, careless of sudden death, and gloated over such colouring. Down we spiralled, and down, and blue and white and yellow tree-lupins fringed the roadside, while great tufts of catmint starred the rosy rocks, and cotton-flowers waved in a wind which blew softly from the south. "*Bharal*"—Mephisto nodded to some mountain sheep, and I wondered why the animal, which inhabited the remote and high Himalayas, should bear the Russian name for sheep. (Up to the moment I have not solved this mystery, but *bharal* is definitely a Russian and not a Himalayan word, yet in every book on Everest and similar expeditions one meets it.)

We swung past Mlety, a funny small town full of garrison huts now filled with nettles, and churchyards where pigs played hide and seek behind tombstones, and came to an abrupt standstill owing to three very large beasts that lay asleep across the road. They looked like a cross between moose and Highland cattle, and not all the combined efforts of the hillmen, Mephisto, and myself could shift them. Suddenly the sailor's bored voice said behind us: "You waste your time; get me a bucket of water."

I felt annoyed. Why on earth hadn't I thought of that myself? Five minutes later I took delight in reciting *The Ancient Mariner* (in English) because, although there were springs in plenty all around us, a bucket was definitely unprocurable. "What is that you are saying?" asked the sailor.

I gave him a graphic prose translation and he knit his brows. "But we don't want to *drink* the water, and we haven't got a ship, and there are no seabirds here?"

"You are so literal-minded. What I meant was . . ."

By the time I had finished explaining, the hillmen had filled their fur caps at the nearest spring and dashed the contents into the faces of the moose-cattle. "Splendid!" shouted Mephisto. "Why didn't I think of that?" Dragging his battered straw hat from his head he fled in the direction of the spring.

It took three separate applications of water from three separate hats to move those beasts. Finally, they grunted sleepily, twitched their tails and lumbered off the road. Two miles farther on we met a herd of wild horses, four foals among them. They did everything except climb into the car, and I suspected the hillmen of fell designs upon them. Beautiful beasts, their owner was a road-mender who lay asleep, as usual, on the low parapet separating us from the precipice. While Mephisto was prodding him awake I asked the sailor how it was that a road-mender should have so many horses.

He looked astonished. "Why not?"

"Well, he must be a capitalist to have so many horses."

The wrath of all Russia opened on my head. Those horses were not for sale; they were to carry the owner's wife, children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Did I not know that in the Caucasus man loved his horse first and foremost? Did I not know that a Caucasian would rather slit his own throat than treat his horse like a common creature out of which he could make money?

"Yes, but doesn't the State own the horses?"

A very involved explanation left me with the idea that the State owned the roadman, but that the roadman's horses were sacrosanct. It was a pity for the sailor's eloquence that the horse-owner himself should stroll up to me and ask if I would "like to buy a nice brood mare, very cheap, only 750 roubles?"

He was a fine-looking old man with aquiline features, twirling moustaches, and long black beard. "See," said Mephisto proudly, "he is ninety-nine years old."

"Nonsense."

But he gave Mephisto a sheaf of papers and from them I learned that in very truth he would be a hundred on his next birthday. And there he was sleeping on narrow parapets, breaking stones on the roadway, riding twenty-five miles to his home when the day's work was done. Almost I wished I could have bought the brood mare. . . .

We drove on, and a hideous smell suddenly reminded me of the trout, which had long since formed a huddled heap at Mephisto's side of the windscreen. Mountain winds, scorching sun, and petrol-fumes had reduced them to a deplorable mass. The sailor smacked his lips, "When we stop for dinner we shall enjoy those, Citizeness."

Mephisto saved me. "The Citizeness has green tickets for her meat; she will eat in the restaurant at Ananur."

"Restaurant" sounded fearsome; but anything was preferable to those trout strung so lightheartedly back in Daryal Gorge. The time, however, was already four o'clock, and I suggested timidly that we might have a brief meal by the roadside and push on to Tiflis; an argument greeted with frantic shrieks from the hillmen and the sailor. "You have not seen our café at Ananur: we have so many friends there that you must meet—and the music, ah, the music. . . ."

"But alas for the trout," added the sailor sadly, and kissed his hand to their revolting, wizened heads.

I felt so sorry for him that I hunted through my handbag

and fished out the three pink tablets given me by the Turkish doctor. Pleased by this slight attention, he swallowed them all at once and showed such immediate signs of intelligence that I wished I had kept them for myself.

Still we twisted and twirled downhill, wild boar watching us from afar, until we reached the broad green valley where the Khevsurskaya Aragva River tumbled to meet his twin brother, so that they might run together into the steel-blue waters of Kura and float on his bosom to the haven of the Caspian Sea. The vineyards that had appeared as little patches from Gudaur were now great tracts of land that stretched as far as eye could see, and along the road the Georgian boys took it in turn to shake the branches of the huge cherry-trees so that the ripe fruit plopped into the mouths and hands of their companions. For nobody worked in Georgia—unless they were forced to do so. A slim, white-bloused youth, asked to empty two tins of petrol into our tank by Mephisto, rubbed his stomach and said lazily, "I have eaten to-day." Women and children lay under the trees, eating, sleeping, or merely staring into space. Village inns and cafés were full; village shops deserted. Why bother to exert yourself in this delicious climate where a minimum of labour produced a plethora of food—and drink? The Soviets . . .? Oh, they were nice, kindly folk who offered you lots of advantages that really didn't interest you, and they were a great improvement on Tsarist troops, who had made you garner grain for them, build roads for them, and give them your best home-brewed wines. But it was stupid to get excited about the Soviets the way other Russian peoples did, for that only upset your comfort and led to this tiring business of education. Much better to drowse in the sun, watching the plums, apples, and pears growing on the trees and, in the autumn, to tread the bubbling grapes beneath your feet so that you might have wine to drink throughout the short, dark winter.

And Stalin was a Georgian! All the energy never used

by generations of this swarthy southern race had concentrated in one man.

They were proud of him, in their lazy Georgian way. In the "restaurant" at Ananur, which turned out to be a tiny hotel with a garden café sheltered from the fierce sun by a network of vines, men talked much of Yosif Visarionovich in careless, familiar voices which inferred that although he was leader of the people he was also one of themselves. Here was another facet of the man of steel—he was a prophet in his own country. Beside me two bearded farmers, black-coated, red-capped, ate quantities of boiled eggs and drank bottles of golden wine which cost them 117. 50 apiece. "Yosif Visarionovich is a grand fellow," they said. "He has the welfare of the people at heart," and the elder one added, as he cleaned his nails with the point of a short, bright dagger from his belt, "He has brought us peace and plenty. Have you seen our Georgian *kolkhozes*? Ah, you must visit those and watch the great tractors at work. Do you know, our production of fruit, maize, and grapes has gone up 500 per cent since we had this fine mechanization. Besides," he finished dreamily, "it makes life so much easier for us."

And that, of course, was the most important thing to a Georgian. Before the Revolution he had squatted in the dust by his doorway, after giving his crops the minimum of attention, and waited patiently for nature to do the rest. But sometimes nature let him down, and more often the Tsarist troops arrived on punitive expeditions, when the Georgian had to shed his lethargy and fight for his independence. A love of war was ingrained in him, but, at the same time, one could have too much of a good thing, and the lack of all sense of security was most irritating. Now he watched the immense tractors turning the rich soil, shook bags of all kinds of new fertilizers over his trees and vineyards, sat back and waited while agricultural science brought him wealth.

The zither player from the little orchestra at the far end of the garden strolled across for a glass of wine. "We are telling her about Yosif Visarionovich," announced the bearded ones (as though nobody else in all Russia had mentioned Stalin's name to me before).

"Yes, yes, he is one of us, you know, the greatest son Georgia has ever had. Wait until you reach Tiflis and you will see what wonders he has done—handsome new buildings, motor-cars, asphalt roadways, big theatres, a huge university . . . stupendous, stupendous! The people made all these wonders themselves, with a little help from Moscow engineers."

The "little help" amused me, but I said politely that I had heard that Rustaveli Prospect was one of the finest streets in Russia.

The zither player looked worried. "But you must not call it that any longer. It is now—let me see, is it called after Engels, Marx, or Lenin?"

The bearded ones could not remember, the waiter could not remember, three hillmen at the next table were equally perplexed. Another two bottles of wine were called for because, as the zither player wisely said, "wine lubricates the memory." But before the first bottle was empty everybody had forgotten about Rustaveli Prospect and the conversation was all about a *kolkhoz* in the Dushet hills which had produced a prodigious amount of cherries. "And they *can* them," somebody said in an awestruck voice. "There is a great machine which boils the fruit in syrup and drops it into separate cans that seal themselves."

The very idea to appeal to a Georgian. I left them still talking about it and went in search of Mephisto. He was asleep in the driving-seat, and beside him the sailor was just finishing the last of the trout. I felt rather guilty, for I too had had trout for dinner, but a fresh, delicious fish nicely grilled. Not that the sailor was envious: "Citizeness, these trout were excellent!" he averred, and I sat down

meekly in a mess of bones, fins, and skins. In the back the hillmen were absorbed in a game of chess under difficulties, as the rams and goats stampeded over the men every other minute.

"The baggage-car has passed us." There was triumph in Mephisto's tone.

I was too sleepy to care much. This mellow Georgian countryside, steeped in sunshine, made me lazy and at peace with the world, and I nodded until we reached Mtskheth, that age-old city where the Georgian kings had their capital until the fifth century. How old her towers and bastions are I do not know, but every traveller to Russia should see her frowning down on Kura River. Grecian influence shows clearly in some of her buildings and palaces. Byzantine work also has its place, but the heart of her is Eastern, and through two thousand-odd years that heart has beat steadily, forcing the grey and gold glory of Mtskheth to turn her back scornfully on the races who have tried to storm her, to batter her, to raze her to the ground; forcing her, too, to look down in disdain on such modern atrocities as the Lenin Hydro-Electric Station a mile or so away at Zemo-Avchalsk. Lovely, delicate, remote, Mtskheth keeps her ancient culture, her rich stained windows, her Byzantine columns and her royal memories secure from Tsarist and Soviet development alike. And wandering through her sunlit streets where the walls crumble and the dust lies thick on unused steps, one knows the eternal magic of Russia, the vast land which swings eternally between East and West. . . .

Mephisto gave me two hours in Mtskheth—I wanted two years. Before I am old I must go back there, lay my hands once more on warm parapets of yellow stone, stand again in the courtyard where a savage Georgian king stood perplexed and afraid at news of a Messiah who had arisen in Palestine, walk for a second time through the ruined naves of the churches which were the outcome of that fear. . . .

Reluctantly I returned to the car. Mephisto was drinking *piva* from the bottle; the sailor was picking his teeth; the hillmen were still playing chess and the animals still rampaging over the board. I shook myself: this was the twentieth century, and Soviet Russia had nearly finished two Five Year Plans. Behind me the thrum of electric generators sounded loud on the evening air; ahead of me the pylons marched over the foothills to Tiflis.

The light died swiftly as we followed the curving road into the fertile basin between the main Caucasus and the rocky heights of Armenia, and the scent of syringa filled the dusk as peasants passed us with great loads of it for market. From the ridge of hills about five miles short of the city we saw a blaze of lights that seemed to cover the whole wide plain, and then we ran on to an asphalt highway bordered by new factories, new apartment houses, new shops. Trams clattered towards us, motors hooted, buses charged along. . . . Tiflis was showing me her new face as welcome. But what was it Disraeli had said about Russia? That she had two faces, an Asiatic face which looked always towards Europe; and a European face which gazed always towards Asia. To-morrow, perhaps, Tiflis would show me her Asiatic features.

V

After the mountains, Tiflis seemed an inferno, and for the first night of my stay there I prowled restlessly about my big bedroom, scarcely able to breathe. After a day with a shade temperature of 104 degrees, the night had brought no relief from the intense heat, and the mere effort of opening the windows on to my balcony made me drip with perspiration. I felt gloomy: there were so many things I wanted to see in this old, old city. Was I to be thwarted by physical inability to stand its climate? There were other things too: the water tasted strongly of chloral, the hotel was

enormous and rather frightening after mountain huts, and the Georgians were gallant. I had been warned of this but had thought my Moscow friends were teasing me. In my experience the Soviet citizen had a remarkably sane and balanced outlook upon sex, kept it rather in the background during conversation, preferred to talk about engineering rather than love-making.

But in Tiflis, where the bulk of the population were Georgian, Armenian, or Turkish, Lotharios abounded. They swaggered into the dining-room and sat down at your table, they dogged your footsteps in the street, they stood below your balcony and serenaded you. In short, they took a bit of getting used to, but although I had misgivings about Tiflis that first night I ended by liking it even better than Moscow. For, however much the Asiatic face of Tiflis might look longingly towards Europe, it remained essentially an Eastern face.

How old was Tiflis? Nobody really knew, but she was certainly one of the most ancient cities in the world. The name meant "warm springs" and legend had it that a remote Georgian king, when hunting, wounded himself with his spear, laved the wound with water which bubbled hotly from a near-by spring, and found it healed immediately, an event which pleased him so much that he decided to build his fortress on this wonderful spot. A lesser-known legend, which I liked even better, was that the same king brought down a bird with his bow and arrow, saw it fall into the spring, and dashed towards it only to find that it was boiled and ready to eat by the time he picked it out. (As I wallowed in a sulphur bath in a twelfth-century building, I felt glad that king had chosen Tiflis for his capital.)

The bath was invigorating: I emerged ready to brave any temperature, any humidity. Immediately afterwards, Tovarisch S——, whose name had so cowed the Turkish doctor in the train from Mineralny Vody, called for me and whirled

me off to his house for dinner, where I demolished roast goose with gusto.

"There is another guest," he told me, "Ekaterina Dzugashvili,¹ mother of our Stalin."

A dear old lady, dressed in black with what my mother used to call a "mutch" framing her face, rose to greet us. "And did you see my Soso in Moscow?" she asked eagerly.

When I said yes, she was full of questions. "How did he look?" "Was his heart troubling him?" "Had that drawn look beneath his eyes disappeared?"

I felt ashamed that I could not answer all her questions fully. Looking at Stalin I had been conscious only that I was in the presence of the greatest personality I had ever met (John Gunther describes him as the "greatest *single* personality in the world," and that is the most truthful remark any one has ever made about Stalin); but this nice, simple old woman wanted to know the intimate, infinitely more important things which every mother wants to know about her son.

I told her of Gorki's funeral and she crossed herself piously. "A great loss to Russia—but tell me Citizeness, are you going back to Moscow? If so, will you please take Soso some candy? He always loves the candy I make for him."

She was a darling. Listening to her I saw Stalin, not as the towering figure in peaked cap, greatcoat, and high boots, but as the little barefooted boy who had run errands for his mother through Tiflis streets and always brought her back a wild flower, as the growing youth aware of a strange power within him, who entered a college to train for the priesthood and with that act brought his mother all joy, as the student who found he could not reconcile the tyranny of the Greek Church with the freedom for the people promised in the revolutionary writings over which he pored through weary nights, as the grown man who knew he must follow the doctrines of Communism.

¹ Ekaterina Dzugashvili died on June 4th 1937, in Tiflis.

Ekaterina, who loved her son so deeply, must have suffered a hundred agonies during the next twenty years. Metekh, once the fort and in later days the prison of Tiflis, held her Soso in its grim embrace for a period, but not for nothing had the child of the 'eighties discovered every nook and cranny in that mass of grey stone overhanging Kura River, and a daring escape was successful. Other prisons, however, claimed the firebrand, and to Ekaterina, praying and waiting in Georgia, came isolated scraps of news. . . . He was free, exhorting the peasants to revolt. . . . He was again captured by the Tsarist police. . . . He was in Poland, had been seen in Prague. . . . He had been sent to Siberia. . . .

Stalin himself has told of that deadly and final incarceration which ended with the Revolution. But nobody except his mother can give the full and absolutely sincere story of his life. The ruler of all the Russias owes much, if not all, to her, and the indomitable spirit which shone from her tear-dimmed eyes as she spoke of him showed me where the Man of Steel had found his strength.

"I went once to Moscow," she smiled, "but it was too grand for me, although Soso was so kind and thoughtful. I like best when he can spare time to come to Tiflis, but that is not often. You see, he is *very busy*."

I said good-bye to her feeling that while Stalin might have "the greatest single personality in the world," his mother had the sweetest.

VI

The midday sun blazed on the Asiatic face of Tiflis. Cobbled streets that twisted uphill were full of small grey donkeys that stepped daintily among piles of refuse. On their backs they bore loads of lettuces, cucumbers, gherkins, grapes, tomatoes, and beside them laughing children played hop-scotch and ring-o'-roses. People walked slowly, stopping for a gossip with neighbours every few yards, and the

houses had queer, jutting balconies on which bedding, washing, and babies cradles made a colourful patchwork. Below the fine new town, where the European face turned yearningly towards the Caspian, little alleys ran crazily down to Kura, a sullen grey flood that carried the most ancient part of the city on its high banks of rock. Here the streets were full of gay shops where coils of bright-dyed wool draped the doorways, and cobblers hammered at their work, and old men in long robes chanted their wares in high-pitched voices. You could buy anything here: shoes, clothes, food, drink, tobacco, tallow for candles, carpets, pots and pans. A gorgeous Bokhara rug served as background for an atrocious skirt of a tartan never known in Scotland; a pile of aluminium pans decorated a silver-fox coat worth hundreds of pounds in Europe. Crowds of people strolled up and down, bargaining and shouting to each other in Persian, Kurdish, Uzbek, Georgian Turkish . . . a multitude of languages. Women drew thin black veils across their faces as I passed, hillmen slapped me on the back and chaffed me as to my purchases, gallant Georgians rolled their eyes and told me they "liked the European women."

On a square which threatened to precipitate itself into Kura at any moment was the Shaitan Market, an astonishing place where a Caucasian tribesman nursed a baby kid, and a sow helped herself to the contents of a sack of onions, and a policeman aided a farmer to shoo a flock of mountain sheep out of the way of the ox-drawn wagons, and bristly pigs that were first-cousins to wild boars squealed merrily as they snuffed among the debris of bruised fruit, cabbage stalks, and dung. Protesting cattle were stuffed in pens, goats wandered at will, mares with foals rent the hot air with their whinnies. Piled high on stalls were water-melons, peaches, apricots, cherries, apples, grapes, pumpkins, marrows, cauliflowers . . . every imaginable kind of fruit or vegetable from the rich *kolkhozes* of the Georgian plain. Red and golden cheeses swung from a string like so many

Chinese lanterns; queer-shaped fish were spread on stone slabs; haunches of venison dangled from hooks.

The live stock commanded most attention. Uzbeks in long tunics blazoned with green and gold embroidery and tiny rainbow-hued skull-caps; Caucasians in white blouses and about twenty different varieties of fur caps; Jews in brilliantly striped shirts; women wrapped in shawls, who carried goatskins full of water for sale—all these crowded round the animals, praising one, condemning the next, bargaining over a third. The throng was so thick that movement was difficult, and as I wriggled my way through the press a camel swayed up the road from the river, a magnificent figure in scarlet robes seated on his back. It was the one touch needed to complete the Eastern scene . . . but my delight was dashed when I was told that this beast and his rider were no forerunners of a desert caravan, but actors in a "talkie" being made in the new film studio! Nevertheless, I was grateful for their presence.

Plodding across the bridge over Kura I saw Metekh straight ahead, its dark walls merging into the huge rock which rose sheer from the swift-running water, and wondered anew how Stalin had ever managed to escape from such a formidable place. Now a national museum, it is open to the public; and although the dark cells formerly occupied by Stalin, Gorki, and other leading revolutionaries are decorated with portraits, photographs, and red banners, one still feels the cruelty, the horror, of this gaunt prison. Standing in Stalin's cell under a naked electric bulb, I looked about me. Daylight entered only through a thin slit in the massive stone, age-old damp had made a patchwork of recent whitewash, a hole in the centre of the uneven floor had served as latrine. From the wall a picture of a laughing Stalin, holding a small child in his arms, stared down at me. . . . Strange metamorphosis—the Stalin of the Metekh cell into the Stalin of the Kremlin.

Leaning over the parapet in the outer courtyard one

could see the crazy little houses that clung to the high cliffs on this side of Kura, their tumbledown walls seeming inadequate protection against the grey river that swept far below. Yet people still lived in these houses, and children clambered dangerously on the very lip of the precipice, their laughter ringing out as they threw stones into the distant water. "Very soon," my companion told me, "all these houses will be pulled down, all the old town will be demolished. We are building night and day in Tiflis."

Such changes were right. Old Tiflis was insanitary, dirty, overcrowded. But I was glad I had seen it as it had stood throughout the centuries, the gateway between East and West. In a few years it would be another Kharkov, a place of glittering white skyscrapers and brave new factories—the entrance from the Georgian Highway already showed me that. Meantime, I thanked heaven, the old town was mine to wander in.

Once upon a time Tiflis indulged in the midday siesta; but the Soviets had no intention of pandering to the lazy Georgians, and now offices, factories, and shops were open all day long. Egged on by Stakhanovite workers, the population picked tea and tobacco, made boots, wove silk and other fabrics, canned fruit and vegetables, forged machinery for the Baku oil fields, made wine for export—mostly to Greece—carried on a hundred and one trades. Georgia's one energetic son was galvanizing his fellow-men into an activity of which they had never dreamed before.

But working hours were short, and leisure hours were long. By five o'clock in the afternoon the gallants of Tiflis took the air in *droschkeys* driven by enormous coachmen in heavy coats, bright scarfs, and fur caps, who presented a queer contrast to their fares lolling on the shabby cushions clad in the thinnest of silk shirts or blouses and light flannel trousers. How those drivers existed in the broiling heat I do not know, but one whom I hired informed me that he "wore the same clothes summer and winter." Each *droschky*

boasted two fine horses, although the vehicles themselves were derelict. Bowling along beside Kura in one of these was very pleasant, especially if you went along the embankment where little Kurds and Turcomen and Uzbeks gambolled in the sun while their mothers squatted on the white steps leading to the bandstand and listened to the music. "Zion Cathedral," said my driver suddenly, "very fine, tenth century."

He drew in his horses and I tiptoed into that adorable building with its ancient carving and its lovely stained-glass windows to be greeted by the clack-clack of fifty typewriters. The Zion Cathedral was now a Government office!

"Desecration," I told the driver as I fled from sight of fifty good little Soviet citizens typing for dear life beneath windows put up by a Georgian king nearly a thousand years ago. He chuckled and cracked his whip. "You like the Armenian Church better, perhaps?"

I didn't. It was rococo, flamboyant, frightful, and the incense smelt of carbolic.

"Drive me to the funicular, please."

We climbed narrow streets to the boulevard which runs along the hill-side and is guarded at one end by the fortress of the city. Here I dismissed the *drosbky* and took a forty-kopek ticket at a little turnstile. Swiss funiculars are terrifying enough: Russian ones are worse. With a frantic rattling of winches we progressed by inches up Mount St. David, from the summit of which a little church with a shining golden cross looks down on Tiflis.

The sun was setting as we reached the top and stepped out on to a plateau where young men and women danced to the music of a loud-speaker, or played a variety of rounders, or ate ice-cream. Nice creatures they were, enjoying themselves to the full after their day's work, but I turned my back and stared at the mountains. Far to the north the Caucasus formed a rosy chain against the pale evening sky,

Kasbek towering in the centre. To the east Makhat rose, his steel-grey severity dappled with red shadows. To the south the Said-Abad mountains showed blue, ethereal, the mask which for so long a time had hidden the tortured features of Armenia. Below me lay Tiflis, a huddle of red, white, and yellow roofs from which the tall spurs of cypress sprang proudly. As the light faded a faint mist stole across the plain and through it the lights began to shine. . . .

Behind me young Tiflis skipped on the close green turf, and a second loud-speaker boomed out news of the Spanish Civil War, and a woman popped her head out of a tiny booth and chanted, "*Esquimo, Esquimo*" (the popular and apt name for ice-cream in Russia).

Electric lights festooned the funicular as we trundled down to the city. Through the hot twilight I walked the streets of the old town where cellar wine-shops tossed pools of gold up their steep ladders to the rough pavements, and men chalked chess-boards on the cobbles and crouched beside them, playing their favourite game with different shaped pebbles. In a little square where a fountain splashed, a hillman dumped his bundle of mattress and clothing, removed his high boots and his thick, striped socks, washed his feet in the cool, fresh water. In the park, men, women, and children crowded round the high parachute tower from the platform of which brawny-armed women pushed customers into space with the negligence born of long practice. A Georgian caught me by the arm. "Come along, Citizeness, come along!"

I had seen these parachute towers in every park I had visited, but had always been too cowardly to try them. The Russians were "air-minded"; I definitely was not. But here in Tiflis, where the scent of magnolia blossom filled the night and the people moved lightheartedly to and fro I found a strange new courage. "See," said the Georgian, "even the children have their own little tower."

Impossible to be beaten by these seven-year-olds who

dropped gracefully to earth while the red parasols of their parachutes opened above their heads. Besides, one was strapped securely into a wide belt of webbing. . . . We set off at a trot for the base of the tower.

Climbing the narrow spiral stair, inside it I knew mis-giving once more. Suppose the ropes didn't work, or the webbing gave way, or the parasol developed a tear? Breathless I crawled on to the platform, where an immense woman immediately seized hold of me, fastened the belt about my middle and lifted me bodily over the side. Awful moment . . . my stomach rushed up to meet my brain . . . my throat contracted . . . my feet pawed empty air. . . . Then, miraculously, a blissful, floating sensation took possession of me and I sailed slowly to earth.

I spent five roubles on that parachute—at fifty kopeks a time.

It was late when I left the park. At the gate were two small Kurds trying to make an arm-chair with crossed hands on which to carry their baby brother. He was a stolid infant of about eighteen months and their efforts were unavailing. They could not understand a word of Russian, but when I lifted the baby and marched towards the cranberry-juice kiosk they followed with hoots of delight. I carried the baby across the bridge, he dribbling cranberry happily, while the brother and sister skipped beside me, trying to tell me where they lived. Their home was one of those frightening houses overhanging Kura, and the mother scolded them roundly for sneaking off to the park while her back was turned. But the father, who could speak Russian, smiled indulgently, murmured, "The Flowers of Life," and offered me a glass of tea. "Every year," he said simply, "the river eats away a little more of our back-yard."

"And aren't you afraid your whole house will slide into Kura one night while you sleep?"

He yawned, showing white teeth. "Ah, well, that has not happened yet."

The mother burst into a torrent of speech. The baby had ruined my frock; I must let her wash it for me.

When the father interpreted I shook my head. "Tell her I like babies; I have some of my own."

But she looked worried. Probably the Citizeness came from Moscow and would develop horrible ideas of Tiflis hospitality? When she learned that my home was in England she tore two strings of uncut turquoises from her neck and handed them to me with a beaming smile.

"We did not know," translated the father, "that the *Angleeski* were ordinary people like ourselves."

"But the turquoises are too valuable: you must not make me presents like that."

The mother twisted them round my neck and the father said: "In Kurdistan we chip them out of the rock-face—they are just stones."

Further argument would only result in offence, so I thanked the couple profusely, sipped my fragrant tea and asked if the little boys went to school.

"Yes, on the hill-side by Mount David. Go there to-morrow and see the nursery-school. Part of it is shut this hot weather, but the children whose mothers are at work still go each day. They have a studio there where artists paint pictures of flowers on wooden bricks—very beautiful."

I left them about midnight. The children were fast asleep in a colossal bed; the mother was mending small garments; the father was making tallow dips. Asiatic they might be; but they could give many a lesson in simple courtesies to European peasantry.

I walked home through streets still thronged with people. From twisting alleyways light streamed redly, and on funny outside staircases of wood families took their ease. An old man staggered past me bearing all his household goods on his back; crowded tram-cars clanged along at breakneck speed, men swarming round their sides; a youth sat cross-legged on an upturned box and played a lilting tune on

reed pipes; on the embankment giant white Canterbury bells shone silver in the moonlight and palm-leaves drooped above them and feathery acacias rustled in the night breeze. To the right the dome of Zion gleamed in the flood-lights, and on the hill-side to the south the cross and star in front of David's Church blazed high.

How could I ever have had qualms about Tiflis, city of a thousand lights?

VII

Remembering the Kurd's advice, I visited the nursery-school where two hundred-odd little creatures spent happy days. They were having their rest when I arrived, all lying peacefully in white cots, so I went to see the workshops where men and women painted lovely things on wood plaques and made exquisite dolls' furniture out of plywood. Back in the airy classrooms there was a splendid effort by a child of six, a model of Rustaveli Prospect with houses and trams cut out and chalked on pieces of cardboard, with flower-beds and trees in moss, with tram-lines in wire and the roadway in sand. The ingenious infant had even fashioned arc-lamps from white paper and overhead tram-cables from pieces of string. In another room were the results of a recent visit to the cinema, after which the children had been told to chalk what they had seen. Here the savagery of the Slav slowed itself rather crudely, for all the pictures were of Red soldiers fighting an unknown enemy, and in a particularly fearsome one I noticed an enemy lying in a pool of blood while two Red Army men operated a machine-gun in the background.

Botany was taught extremely well, and the walls of one room were decorated with posters showing all the processes through which a seed must go before it becomes a flourishing plant. In another room cases of silkworms were kept with illustrations showing each stage of their development, and

in a third there were fascinating round tables, the surfaces of which revolved to show alphabets and numbers. Each child had a box containing pictured duplicates of these and was taught to place its plaques in correct position on the table.

"And here," said the motherly woman who ran the school, "are their story-books. In them they have to write their own versions of tales I tell them."

Those books were delicious. Most of their authors had chosen *Little Red Riding Hood* or *The Babes in the Wood*; but one brainy child had invented a story about a small boy who stole his father's hat and walking-stick and sallied forth hoping that his companions would think he really was his father. Alas, they only jeered at him, seeing through his disguise, and he returned home dejected. The illustrations to this masterpiece were quite charming.

All text-books and lessons in this school were in Georgian, but at the age of eight the children moved on to the State school where Russian was compulsory.

I should have liked to stay all day watching these babies, but I had promised to drive out to a big *kolkhoz* on the banks of the Kura, some ten miles outside the city. There, so the Intourist driver assured me, I should see Georgia at its best. Unfortunately, our way led through the market, so I spent three-quarters of an hour in the midday sun tooting the horn while he chased animals from underneath our bumpers. When he took his seat again, tired and hot, we found a hen had laid an egg in the back seat, and this gift pleased him greatly. "My dinner," he said, and popped it into his coat pocket.

Then we had an argument as to the best path to take when we reached the *kolkhoz*. In the end we dashed down a sandy track between two high rows of tomato plants, rounded a sharp bend, and very nearly cascaded into the Kura. Workers rushed forward with shouts and yells, and helped to turn the car by the simple expedient of lifting its back wheels clean off the ground and slewing them round

to the detriment of two tomatoes and a remarkably fine vine. After that we jogged through a sunflower field and under two miles of trellis-work, studded with great bunches of black grapes, to a clearing where several of the collective farmers lived.

For the next hour I tramped round that *kolkhoz* admiring gigantic cabbages, lettuces, peas, and beans. Everything in Georgia seemed to grow so much bigger and more imposingly than anywhere else that one felt rather awed at such lavishness on the part of nature. "See," said the foreman, and plucked a tomato I could barely hold in my two hands. And, "See," said his wife who trotted behind him, thrusting a bunch of green grapes the size of greengages under my nose.

They invited me to dinner, and I followed them into their home a little bewildered by the magnitude of their fruits. A bright child of about fourteen, with fuzzy pigtailed sticking out above either ear, was busy preparing our food. "She is a good daughter," her parents told me, and she certainly could cook. A fishy but delectable soup was followed by *shashelik* with young French beans, and the home-baked black bread melted in the mouth. When we had reached the tea-sipping stage we moved from the kitchen into the parlour where a grand piano had place of honour. "I bought it out of my share of last year's profits," announced the foreman; "it came all the way from Tiflis by ox-wagon."

I blinked. "Do you play it yourself?"

"No, no, but Mahtoushka does—come along, Mahtoushka!"

She arranged herself on the red plush stool, giggling slightly as she did so, and upon my astonished ears fell the marching song of the 42nd (the Black Watch).

Whaur hae' ye been a' the day,
Bonnie laddie, Hielan' laddie . . . ?

The thing was incredible. "Where," I asked, "did your little girl learn a Scots tune?"

"Ah," said the foreman confidentially, "her mother was friendly with a soldier in Denikin's Army."

There was nothing left for me to say.

VIII

Every morning when I woke up I stood on my balcony and watched the Cross of David flashing in the sunlight, and felt I could not bear to leave Tiflis. My opinion of Georgians had changed: their gallantry no longer annoyed me, because it was so childlike and spontaneous, and I had discovered that many of them had red-gold hair and clear, pale skins, instead of the swarthy appearance I had thought they all possessed. But it was the city itself which held me: the maze of bazaars, the cobbles polished by generations of bare feet, the Shaitan Market, the grey welter of Kura, the cypress spurs, the glowing poinsettias on Rustaveli Prospect, the gay people of many races who chattered and gossiped and bartered under a tropic sun.

As the only European in the vast hotel I was thoroughly spoilt by management and guests alike. When I said I had always cherished a desire to taste camel's milk they rushed me across the river to the film studio, and demanded to know whether they had any. It served me right when a man came back with a cupful of pungent smelling liquid, but I gulped it down bravely while an admiring crowd of "extras" looked on. When I asked if bear steaks were ever eaten in Transcaucasia a waiter fled through the old town in search of this delicacy and eventually returned with something that tasted like tender venison. No wonder I did not want to leave Tiflis . . . and no wonder I developed a shameless technique in dealing with her inhabitants.

There were, as example, Serge and Ali, the former a fair, shaven-headed Georgian; the latter an olive-skinned Turk from Sukhum. They were sitting in the hotel lounge when

I strolled in for my evening *piva*, and they immediately invited me to their table.

"It is very kind of you, Citizens, but I have letters to write."

Serge roared with laughter. "Nobody writes letters in Tiflis: come and share our *piva*!"

I tried politeness, haughtiness, shyness—in the end I joined them.

"So," said Ali briskly, "what is the number of your room?"

This direct approach rather unnerved me, and I explained that I was full of years, and the mother of many children, and the wife of a very large and ill-tempered husband.

"What does that matter?" asked Serge. "You are alone for the moment, are you not?" He took another long pull at his beer and added dreamily that he liked blue-eyed women.

I regarded him severely. "And evidently it has not occurred to you that I dislike men who shave their heads. What romance is there about a shining, domed cranium?"

He clapped on a fur cap and grinned at me. "Now, is that better?"

"Once again," said Ali, "what is the number of your room? My head is not shaven and all Turks are romantic."

He had a sense of humour. We ended up by discussing tobacco-growing on the Black Sea Coast but later, when I was leaning on my balcony watching the crowds, a piercing yell came from below. "Citizeness, will you come to the theatre with us to-night?" There were Serge and Ali, beaming all over their faces, staring up at me.

They waited for me in the hall, very correct in clean white blouses and caps, the one carrying a bunch of spiky gladioli, the other a box of sweets. All the way along Rustaveli Prospect they marched one on either side of me, glaring at other gallants who showed signs of interest. Inside the theatre, where an Uzbek company were giving a performance of *Hamlet*, Ali held my right hand while Serge held my left,

and consequently the sweets and flowers kept slipping off my knee on to the floor, while I felt incredibly foolish.

The Uzbeks did their best with Shakespeare, but as I could not understand a word of their language and as their producer had insisted upon depicting Elsinore as an Asiatic village, the whole affair was a trifle odd. We wound up an astonishing evening by eating venison in a crowded café where a very drunk Spanish artist shared our table, and kept repeating to me that one had to know the wine and women of a country before one could understand that country.

"Zigzag," said Ali disapprovingly.

"Yes, very. But tell me, how is it that you, a Turk, drink *piva*?"

"I am a Soviet citizen: I no longer have a religion."

"Zigzag," howled Serge, thrusting his face close to the bulbous nose of the Spanish artist. "Disgusting! Have you no manners, you scum, that you insult the Citizeness like this?"

I tugged at his blouse. The Spaniard staggered to his feet. Ali pulled me towards the door. "Quick, back to the hotel, they are going to fight."

Serge's fist landed on the Spaniard's jaw as we reached the door. "That was a fine one," said Ali complacently, as pandemonium broke out behind us. We pounded up Rustaveli Prospect in silence, and at the hotel he kissed my hand. "I will go back, Citizeness: there is nothing like a good fight."

I walked upstairs, giggling to myself. Interest in my blue eyes faded swiftly in Tiflis.

An hour later a shrill whistle drew me to my balcony. Below in the moonlight Serge stood. He had a split lip and his nice clean blouse hung in shreds from its collar-band. "Citizeness, what is the number of your room?"

Ali materialized from the shadows: "Citizeness, he beat the Spaniard, and all for your sweet sake."

The melodrama boiled down to a bottle of *piva* in the lounge, and attempt at gallantry ended just as it should always end—in friendship.

IX

On a morning when to put a foot out of bed was an effort, I heard of the famous Botanical Gardens of Tiflis, where one might find every Caucasian plant ever grown. In my mind stirred vague memory of a promise to Compton Mackenzie. Somewhere, in another life, I had said I would bring him Caucasian irises and tulips from the tail-end of Europe.

The Armenian, Jewish, and extremely kind manager said: "You must have an interview with the director, and beckoned a pleasant Georgian woman to guide me to this meeting. "I have wanted to show you Tiflis," she said breathlessly, "but you have been so busy always with other matters."

I thought of Serge and Ali and blushed. "I am sorry, Citizeness, but your city holds so much that I want to see."

She sighed. "Perhaps it does, to you: for myself, I have the swollen feet."

That was a bad beginning. Worse was to come.

A *drosbky* took us to a point just short of the fortress, and here we began our journey proper. We had climbed about fifteen hundred stone steps when my guide panted in French, "*Je vous en prie, Madame . . . une limonade gaseuse. . .*"

She had it, at my expense, while I looked on and cursed my ignorance of the habits of guides. Irina now, would never have behaved so foolishly.

We toiled on under sub-tropical trees that all had little labels attached to their trunks, and came to a perfect formal garden marred by the biggest American Pillar rambler I had ever seen. This had wreathed itself around a post in the middle of exquisitely cut and planned beds and reared its flaunting beauty to heaven in defiance of more orderly plants. I liked the American Pillar: I wanted to sit down on

a green bench and gaze at its colourful blossom. Beside me the guide bleated that it was very difficult to get an appointment with the director, and that we had better hurry on. "And I will show you the Bridge of Kisses," she simpered.

As answer to this last word in inanity I marched over to a gardener, and inquired the whereabouts of the mysterious director. He was a Turk and spoke no Russian: I spoke no Turkish: the result was deadlock. Desperate, I practised my old trick of swearing in Russ, and his face lightened. He pointed urgently towards a group of buildings, raised his hand to his mouth and threw back his head. Clearly the director was having a well-earned drink before dinner.

I disturbed him in the middle of a bottle of *piva* and, in response to an invitation, swallowed the other half. But when the talk veered to bulbs I learnt, to my distress, that he could not possibly discuss such an important subject in any language more modern than Latin.

"But you talk Russian fluently?"

"Ah, Citizeness, that is different. With the bulbs, which are my life's work, I must speak the Roman tongue."

I fished out a sad little piece of paper and tried to decipher various Latin names of flowers. He seized it from my hand and fled up another fifteen hundred steps shouting, "Follow me, Citizeness. I have all the bulbs mentioned here!"

By the time I had succoured the collapsed guide and plodded up the steps he had assembled masses of strange, ill-shaped growths in a heap on the path. "There are the irises"—he mumbled a list of unintelligible names—"and there the tulips. And see"—he held out a handful of what looked like dum-dum bullets. "These are among the most rare and exquisite Caucasian flora. I will give you some."

I trotted round after him in the sun until he had filled a small sack of treasures. "How many roubles will all these cost?"

"Not a kopek, Citizeness! We are only too pleased to give away our wonderful flowers—it is such good advertisement."

"Then will you be so kind as to register them to England for me and tell me the charges?"

"But you must take them with you! It is ridiculous to pay good money for postage when you are returning yourself."

I explained that I still had a long way to go through Russia and also that I was doubtful about Customs regulations. To be truthful I was afraid I should lose the precious sack before I ever reached the frontier. But the director was an obstinate man; nothing would satisfy him but that I took the sack with me. "You may start to carry it now," he said graciously, "while I show you my beautiful gardens."

"But I must rejoin my guide; she is waiting for me by the lemonade kiosk."

"Let her wait; that is part of a guide's task. Now, follow me."

I obeyed him, wishing that the Tiflis Botanical Gardens were not laid out on a series of steep hills, and harbouring dark thoughts of Compton Mackenzie in my heart, because the sack got a little heavier every minute in the terrific heat.

"In this garden," said the director, "we claim to have every sort of tree in the world."

Whether that statement was an exaggeration or not I do not know, but they certainly had an astonishing variety of trees all growing higgledy-piggledy, frangipannis next to beeches, palms jostling laburnums, firs towering above acacias. . . . An Arabian Night's Dream of trees. We climbed innumerable steps, crossed and re-crossed the deep chasm which ran through the middle of the gardens by shaky suspension bridges, came at last to a huge bridge in shining steel which looked most incongruous. "The Bridge of Kisses," said the director.

"But it looks so very unromantic?"

"Ah, the original one fell into the gorge, so our engineers built this instead. A magnificent piece of workmanship; we are proud of it."

"I think you might change its name."

"Why? It is a very pretty name."

I wanted to say that it wasn't a pretty bridge, but was too hot to argue further.

An hour and a half later we trailed downhill to the guide, who was still sipping lemonade. She looked so cool and collected that I could have shaken her. "You are too energetic, Citizeness. You will make yourself ill rushing about in this heat."

The director immediately began a long lecture on the inestimable value of exercise in hot weather. It was very involved and he used several Latin medical terms I could not understand, but I gathered that it had something to do with the correct functioning of glands. Suddenly he broke off and looked at his watch. "Ah, I have a botany class in five minutes. Come with me and I will show you the short cut back to Tiflis, through the tunnel. It is a natural tunnel, Citizeness, hollowed right through the rock, and in the Tsarist days it was used for military purposes. Now it is all modernized, beautiful illuminations . . ."

At the entrance to what seemed to be a large cave he bade us good-bye and scurried off. Something had clearly gone wrong with the "beautiful illuminations," as every step we took plunged us into deeper darkness. I gave the guide my box of matches and she walked ahead with little shrieks of fear as each match flickered out, while I came behind with the sack bumping against my knees and drips of icy water plopping down my neck.

Between her shrieks the guide entered into the story of a friend of hers, a lovely young Georgian, who had fallen in love with an officer in Denikin's Army. "So handsome he was. . . . Ow, Citizeness, that was a rat . . .! But she could not make up her mind to go all the way to England with him, so he wrote her one hundred and forty-nine love letters. . . . Ah-h-h, I am slipping on the stones and there are no matches left. . . . He lived in Newcastle-on-Tyne (such a queer name), and he was called Jacques. You must

know him, Citizeness, he is a very well-known figure in your England. . . . Heaven save me, there is a waterfall here! But my friend burned with love for him although she would not leave Russia, and her passion consumed her so that she died. . . .”

Denikin's Army seemed to have been responsible for quite a lot besides fighting in Tiflis. “What happened to the hundred and forty-nine love letters?”

There was no answer because at that moment my companion sat down with a splash in the middle of a young lake. I groped for her arm and hauled her up with difficulty, since I dared not release my hold on the sack, as I could never have found it again in the blackness. We trailed on in a silence broken only by her sniffles, and presently a pinprick of light appeared—the mouth of the tunnel.

We crawled out into the sunlight to be greeted by howls of derision from a group of workers, who had just arrived to mend the “beautiful illuminations.” These, apparently, were paraffin lamps, and all the soot from them had mingled with the little springs in the roof of the tunnel, which had trickled upon us during our journey, so that we were plastered in a black and sticky paste. I felt as though I'd crossed the Styx, but the poor guide was in tears over the ruination of her white frock (one must remember she had sat down with thoroughness in that puddle). “It is the only one I have,” she wailed, “whatever shall I do? One cannot be a guide without a white frock.”

It was a palpably absurd remark, but I felt sorry for her. She was a timid creature with a strong inferiority complex and her job cost her agonies of mind. “If you would not be offended I have a white cotton frock, which I should like to give you in return for your kindness to me this morning.”

She clung to my arm in ecstasy. “Oh, Citizeness!”

Back in the hotel I took out the frock I had worn among the Mountains of the Moon—I had never really fancied it since parting with Ivan, the fleas, and Vladikavkaz—and

shook it out. It seemed an insult to offer it to anybody, but the guide was thrilled. "Such stuff, such cut! To-morrow is my Rest Day so I shall wash and iron it then." She kissed me on both cheeks and skipped off in high glee.

I spent the rest of the day in washing myself, my hair and my garments. Paraffin dust mixed with water is a villainous concoction.

At 7 o'clock I descended for my nightly *piva* with Serge and Ali, who had now developed into firm and most entertaining friends. Going into the Intourist Bureau to pick up my mail I was welcomed by the manager: "I have good news for you, Citizeness. Twelve Americans have arrived. To-morrow you will be able to make the tours, the trips—all together."

"*All together.*" I felt as if somebody had shown me Medusa's head. Tiflis, my gay, colourful Tiflis, to be seen from an auto-bus in company with twelve other tourists? Oh, no, a thousand times no!

The manager eyed me. "But you like Americans?"

"Yes, immensely." How could I explain to him that *in Russia* I disliked the English, the Americans, the French, the Germans, the Spanish, the Italians, the Rumanians, the Swedes . . . everybody from the outside world.

But he was a discerning man. "You have grown very Russian, Citizeness, during your summer in the Union, and now you are like one of ourselves."

I said: "Get me a berth on the night train to Baku."

"But you told me you did not want to go to Baku?"

"I want to go anywhere where there are no tourists."

He grinned: "And what about your passport, which is with the police, and the two days' notice which has to be given before train-bookings?"

I grinned back: "I didn't come here with a stone in my pocket, you know that. Do the best you can."

Half an hour later when Serge and Ali were explaining about the oil pipe-line which runs from Baku to Batum the

manager came across to me. "Your train leaves at midnight." He winked solemnly.

At supper I saw the Americans, twelve pleasant men who were on a special "historical tour," though what that might be I never found out. Anywhere else I should have enjoyed their company—but not in Soviet Russia. Nor would they have enjoyed mine, for I overheard remarks about "savage-looking" Russian women and their peculiar escorts. Certainly the sight of Ali playing a tune on a skewerful of *shashbelik* was an unusual one to Western eyes; but I had grown accustomed to it.

So I fled to Baku and began three days of abortive travel, entirely due to my selfishness in wishing to enjoy Russia by myself.

Baku was ugly. Oil derricks broke the blue sky; patches of oil discoloured the Caspian. In short, oil was omnipresent. I wandered about the city for a day and oil followed me all the way. My one bright moment was when I saw a steamer leaving for Krasnovodsk, with patient Asiatics sprawled all over her decks. . . . If I had had enough ready money I would have boarded her. But apart from that Baku was not my meat. I took the night train back to Tiflis, and heaved a sigh of relief when I learnt that the "historical tour" had gone to the University and would not return until supper-time, after which they would depart for the Black Sea.

The manager smiled inscrutably when he told me this, and I felt a prick of fear. What other bombshell had this Armenian humorist got hidden up his sleeve?

I discovered his perfidy at *piva* time. In a corner of the lounge sat two dejected figures, a bespectacled man in baggy plus-fours, a cobalt shirt and bow-tie; a woman in a black coat and the last stages of exhaustion. "I just can't stand it, George," she was saying in English. "The nerves of my stomach will never function again. Why don't you *do something* instead of sitting there all foolish?"

George lumbered to his feet, looking highly embarrassed. "I guess you'd feel better in bed, Jane dear."

Jane didn't think so at all. There was something George had lost, and until he found it life was going to be uncomfortable for him. "I can't, plain can't go on living, George, if you don't ask that dumb Russian behind the bar what he's done with it."

I was intrigued. What could it be that George had mislaid so carelessly?

He began a round of every one in the lounge, bleating "Narzan," "Narzan," as he bent above each table. "Tell him," whispered Serge fiercely as he reached us, "that I'll give him two bottles of Narzan if he will give me his magnificent stockings."

I looked at George's legs, resplendent in brown and white dice, and tried to keep a straight face. "Narzan," repeated George in a mid-west voice. "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*"

I tried to tell a holy lie, but he looked so perturbed that it stuck in my throat and I answered in English, "Do you want a bottle of Narzan?"

"Jane," he yelled, "here's one of them speaks a little English!"

Jane made a bee-line for our table, her exhaustion vanished. "Well, if that isn't lovely. Oh, my dear, we've had an awful time . . . it's my duodenum, you know, always been delicate, and the food we had on the Volga steamer was just terrible. . . . I mean, yours is a *very nice* country, but when you suffer with your stomach as I do. . . . Well, as I was saying, they gave me a bottle of Narzan water at the hotel in Stalingrad and it did my stomach all the good in the world and I treasured three-quarters of it all the way to that place Ord—I can't pronounce it. . . . I mean, it took me a whole lot of trouble to keep that Narzan water but I just knew there was nothing else fit to drink, and then I brought it over the Georgian Highway . . . my, wasn't I sick and wasn't the driver a fierce-looking man. . . . I

didn't think much of your mountains, Miss . . . er . . . Miss . . . couldn't see them for clouds and they said the road had been repaired, but if that's what they call repairs in Russia they ought to send a man over to Minneapolis to see how we keep our roads. . . . Well, anyway, when we arrived here, and I had the hiccups so I thought I'd die, I went to lie down on my bed and I told George to tell that dark man over there to put my Narzan on ice and now he won't give it us back."

Serge nudged me. "Is she not wonderful, like a talking doll?"

I said, "But you can buy Narzan here."

Jane groaned. "That's not the point at all. George and I paid hundreds of dollars for our trip and one of them went on that Narzan at Stalingrad and I'm going to get it back. Nobody in Soviet Russia is going to swindle me, no, sir!"

I beckoned the barman. "When this Citizeness and her husband arrived they gave you three-quarters of a bottle of Narzan to put on ice for them. Have you got it?"

Being a hot-blooded Georgian he flew into a passion, resenting any aspersion on his honesty. "The *Amerikanski* handed me the bottle with the sort of smile that means 'I have no further use for it,' and I drank it—but it was bad, very bad. Why should they accuse me of stealing their stale and nasty Narzan? Tell them that I will not serve them, not if they die of thirst!"

Serge and Ali clapped delightedly as he thumped the table. This was going to be fun—just as good as fighting a Spanish artist.

I kicked their shins and explained slowly to Jane that the barman was very sorry but he had misunderstood her husband's instructions and had thrown the Narzan away as he thought it was undrinkable. Then Jane let fly. She said such things about the Soviet Union that my ears burned, and I thanked heaven that nobody else in the lounge could understand her. She and George had been all around the

world—a luxury cruise—and never, never, never had she met with such ill treatment. Didn't I realize that her duodenum wouldn't stand these shocks and hardships? Didn't I understand that George was the most influential business man in Minneapolis? Didn't I know that in her house at home they ate milk-fed chicken and drank *pure* water from a special well?

When she paused for breath I suggested a fresh bottle of Narzan.

Jane drooped. It was a terrible thing to lose the mineral water you had nursed from Stalingrad to Tifis.

The barman glared as I gave the order. "Only for you, Citizeness, not for her. She is a devil."

"No, she isn't, she has stomach trouble."

Immediately he clasped his own rotund torso, all sympathy for his late enemy. "Poor thing, poor thing. My brother had that. Do you know, Citizeness, they sawed him into little pieces in the hospital and . . ."

I appealed to Ali. "For pity's sake make him bring the Narzan."

Jane took one sip and developed a second, and more virulent, attack of hiccups which pleased Serge and Ali so much that they began unconsciously to imitate her. The lounge was in an uproar, and George hovered anxiously above his afflicted wife. "Back in Minneapolis . . ." he started, but I had had enough of Minneapolis and shook Jane urgently by the arm. "Don't you think you'd better go to your room?"

Between hiccups she replied that Tifis Narzan was impossible, that she refused to go to bed, that she wanted some food. Grimly I marched them into the dining-room and informed a startled waiter that the *Amerikanski* wished supper at the absurd hour of seven o'clock. George brightened at my translation of the bill of fare but Jane shuddered. "With my . . . hic . . . stomach the way it . . . hic . . . is; I just couldn't face . . . hic . . . anything but a plate

of . . . hic . . . rice, two hard-boiled . . . hic . . . eggs and some tea. But the tea's too strong; tell them . . . hic . . . to bring a glass of hot water with some salt in it."

It sounded an amazing diet for an acute dyspeptic, but I was beginning to hiccup myself out of sympathy so gave the order quickly.

Presently the waiter hissed in my ear. "The cook says, can he use the *omelet* eggs?"

I said "No" hurriedly and firmly. Omelet eggs were bad enough in Kislovodsk, but in Tiflis they were abominations. "And the cook says, how does one prepare hot water with salt in it?"

I told him curtly, made my excuses to George and Jane, and went at the double to the Intourist Bureau, where the manager, just back from an afternoon's outing, was leaning negligently on the counter. "They take you for a guide," he said blandly.

"Quite. I want to take the night train to Erivan."

"Impossible, Citizeness, there is no room."

"Then where can I go?"

He drooped an eyelid. "Kutais?"

I went to Kutais, jolting through the night on a "plain travel" bunk, shared with a voluble Armenian who smelt worse than I had imagined a human being could smell. Apart from this minor fault he was an exceedingly nice person, and gave me a graphic description of his country. "What the Soviets have done for us! You should see our cities, all rebuilt with fine offices and apartment houses and schools. See, here are photographs of my twelve children, seven of them at the State school and doing splendidly. Ah, we are grateful, Citizeness, as only Armenians can be grateful, for we have gone through so much. When I was a child, in 1910, I saw my father and mother butchered before my eyes by the Turks"—here he spat with great precision on to the sleeper on the opposite bunk. "I was fourteen then, but the memory stays with me yet. Always,

through the centuries, Armenia has been the scene of strife, always has she had invaders, always has she been trampled upon by stronger nations—until the Soviets came. Now our Stalin says, 'Have many children for Russia and live in peace.' You should see our children, Citizeness; Erivan is a city of happy brown babies. . . ."

From his lengthy description I visualized a future Soviet Russia peopled mainly by Armenians, as it seemed a point of honour with this race to show their gratitude towards the Party by producing as large families as possible. But his sincerity impressed me; for the first time in her history Armenia was a settled, peaceful country, and I knew from many other accounts that she had proved herself one of the hardest-working republics in the Union.

"And now," he announced about 1.30 a.m., "we shall play chess."

Play we did, in the fitful light of the lamp set in the carriage roof, and the result was complete triumph for Armenia. Swiftly, surely, my enemies skipped across the board while I made futile attempts to guard my king. After the third trouncing we gave it up, and dozed until a yell of "Kutais!" roused me from my odorous but comfortable position on my companion's shoulder.

When Jason and the Argonauts came to Kutais they swept up the rushing waters of the Rion River; but I stepped out on to a modern station where plate-glass windows glittered in the pale dawn light. I felt vaguely disappointed; nothing I had read of Kutais had quite prepared me for this thriving town full of silk-winding factories, hydro-electric stations, and busy streets. I had a glass of tea and some black bread in the buffet and then wandered rather miserably beside the Rion, full of chagrin at George and Jane who had driven me from Tiflis.

A policeman had a bright suggestion. "Why not go in the little bus to Gelat Monastery? It is very old, twelfth century."

It seemed a poor substitute for the Golden Fleece, but I trotted along a street and took my place in the crowded and ramshackle bus, which shook so much as it rattled up steep hills that we had to stop time and again for the driver to pick up bits of the engine that had fallen out on the road. Where a path curved up the rock-face to Gelat he let me out, shouted that the bus would be back in an hour, and drove on.

It was barely eight o'clock, but the sun burned my back as I toiled up to the monastery, where an Ossetian in a floppy, upturned felt hat revived me with tea which I sipped in the cloisters of exquisitely carved stone. Here, at last, was tranquillity, age-old peace that seeped through a body still aching from the night journey and lack of sleep. And here, on queer, yellowed paper, were tenth-century manuscripts of the Gospels, meticulously written by long-dead priests in the Georgian language. I ran my hand over the rough surface of a page and thought of the men who had done this colossal work in the days when Kutais was a turbulent place full of the clash of war. . . .

Violent toots from the bottom of the rock pulled me back to the present. The Kutais bus was the only punctual thing in Transcaucasia. "It is a dead place, that," the driver remarked. "You should have gone to Tskhaltubo; hot mineral springs are there and such gay crowds."

I looked behind me at the grim mountains and at ancient Gelat silhouetted against their darkness, and felt glad I had had at least a glimpse of the Kutais which belonged to legend and history.

I had fled from George and Jane minus any luggage except a rucksack, so I jogged back to Tiflis that afternoon to pick up my gear—and the bulbs—before catching the night train to Batum. Skulking into the Intourist Bureau I ran slap into George and Jane. "Well now, if we're not pleased you're back! We haven't been able to order any food for twenty-four hours because you weren't here to interpret.

Say, could you get our supper for us right now? We're going to Batum to-night."

I knew an impulse to murder. All my dashing about the countryside wasting roubles I could ill afford had been in vain. *They were coming on my train to Batum!*

While they were eating their amazing supper I interviewed the manager. "If you put me anywhere near that couple on the train I'll never forgive you."

He nodded lugubriously. "To-day they have almost killed me. Bells ringing all the time, and poor Sophy (his assistant) rushed off her feet attending to them and to two *Angleeski* ladies who are sick upstairs. As for what they eat . . . ! It took me an hour this morning to pacify the cook."

The train was supposed to leave at eleven o'clock. At nine-thirty to the second George and Jane appeared in the lounge with three cabin trunks, six cases, several thermos flasks, tartan rugs, and an enormous round hat-box which George kept tripping over. At nine-forty-five they started being restive. "Where was the car?" "How long did it take to get to the station?" "Were their seats booked?" "Why didn't that awful manager *do something*?" At ten o'clock the heavens above Tiflis opened and a tropic thunderstorm burst upon the city, reducing Jane to tears and George to a frenzy. At ten-fifteen the manager, goaded beyond all endurance by their footling questions, roared out, "Ask the Citizeness; she has a British passport."

After that there was no escape. They hemmed me in on the sofa, alternately protesting their apologies for taking me for a Russian, and thanking their stars that I was going with them to Batum. And where was I going after that? To Yalta! Well, if that wasn't the best thing that had happened to them in Soviet Russia. "For you know," confided Jane, "it's just terrible travelling without another woman to whom I can explain about my stomach."

Gr-r-r-r!

At eleven o'clock George measured his length over the hat-box for the sixteenth time and demanded to know *when* the car would come. We all put on strained smiles, said, "In a few minutes," and relapsed into silence. "Say"—he turned to me—"do you know any of the authorities in this one-horse place? *Couldn't you ring up Stalin?*"

An incredible couple. Why they ever wasted their substance in travel I could not understand, for they hated it so much. Minneapolis was not in the least responsible for their impossibility—they belonged to the international type of globe-trotter who lacks both sensibility and sensitivity.

Meantime the rain poured down, the thunder rolled and the lightning flashed, and Jane soaked three handkerchiefs with tears, and Serge and Ali, come to bid me good-bye, made embarrassing remarks in Russian. "Why do you not crack her on the head, Citizeness?" "They must be capitalists to have so much baggage." "Why does he dress like a peacock—he is an old man?" "Did you ask him about his stockings? I will throw in a bottle of our best Georgian wine if he will part with them." They ended by presenting Jane with a foaming mug of *piva*, a gift which sent her into a fit of hysterics.

It was after midnight when we packed into a car and tore through the rain to the station, where Jane kicked up a dreadful commotion because she refused to travel with two Russians in her compartment. As George told me, "She is a very delicately nurtured woman, and I couldn't let her suffer such an insult."

"Then you must ask if they have any International sleeping-berths left and pay the difference."

"But I can't ask when they don't understand a word I say."

Exasperated, I whirled on him: "Whatever possessed you to come to Transcaucasia?"

He scratched his head. "I can't think. Back in Minneapolis . . ."

I seized an official and got their seats changed at a charge

of fifty roubles. George was still counting these out with a pained expression when I went off to claim my own berth. A large man in a white suit was just putting his gear on the rack. "Yours is the lower bunk, Citizeness. Have some strawberries?"

Here was haven. In ten minutes we had told each other our life stories. He was an engineer (in reality an architect) who had been designing buildings in Tiflis, and was now going home to Moscow by Batum and Odessa as he had been given several days' rest. His wife was a doctor and they had one small boy. "To-morrow," he told me, "I shall show you Batum."

Two more men came in; one an Armenian economist from Erivan bound for a sanatorium year Yalta, the other a resplendent figure in white ducks with a gold-braided cap. His voice belonged to the parade-ground: "What is wrong with that light?"

We all stared up at the side-lamp which was supposed to switch on for reading purposes, said easily that the bulb had gone, and went on talking. It turned out, however, that Gold-Braid was the station-master of Tiflis and that it was quite impossible for him to travel with a lamp which did not function, so to a train already a good hour and a half late were summoned workmen in greasy overalls, who fiddled with wires so successfully that all the lights in compartment and corridor went out. During the ensuing pandemonium George came creeping along the platform, squinting through the corridor windows. I drew back just too late. "Ah, there you are. What is the Russian for pillow?" Then he glanced uneasily at the engineer. "A friend?"

I said "Yes," stolidly.

You couldn't daunt George. Beckoning me forward he said in a hoarse whisper, "But you're surely not sharing a compartment?"

"Yes, with him and two other men."

"I can't have it," wailed George. "We just won't be able to sleep thinking of you in such a rabble. A single woman . . . it isn't right."

The engineer handed him a pillow with a grave bow and informed him in excellent English that the charge was a rouble. George's mouth opened and shut silently. The "rabble" was not so savage as he had imagined. "You had better get aboard," said the engineer politely. "The train is about to start."

I turned into the compartment. The workmen had gone, and Gold-Braid was divesting himself of his tunic. "See that?" he beamed. "A beautiful light!"

Five minutes after leaving Tiflis station all the lights in the train went out with a bang.

CHAPTER VII
BLACK SEA SYMPHONY

I

IN France one says, "*Je n'ai jamais vu Carcassonne*": in Russia one says, "*Je n'ai jamais vu Batum*," for in Batum, so the Russians tell you, it is always raining, a thick grey mist through which clear vision is impossible. I was fortunate: we arrived in Batum on a brilliant summer morning. An elusive, secretive port, this, hazily associated in the minds of most Europeans with oil tanks and sunflowers, but an enchanting place in reality. The oil was dismissed with a faint sniff as we passed the big refineries neatly tucked away beside the railway and rounded a bend to catch our first sight of one of the loveliest bays on the Black Sea coast, a perfect semicircle of deep blue, silver-flecked water fringed with red sandstone cliffs. In the city itself the Turkish element predominated; Turkish houses, Turkish faces, Turkish shops; winding streets full of lazy men and women who took their ease on doorsteps or even squatted on the pavements themselves. Not so long ago Batum was swept by typhus, by cholera, by all manner of diseases, and even now there were spasmodic outbreaks, mostly emanating from the trading vessels from Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans that filled the harbour. But one forgot plagues when watching the colourful sailors swaggering up from the docks on shore leave, and the gold-eared lascars who swung their legs over the sea wall, and the flags of many nations fluttering against the bright sky. To the north the main Caucasus gleamed in the distance, to the south the sandstone cliffs crept towards the Turkish border.

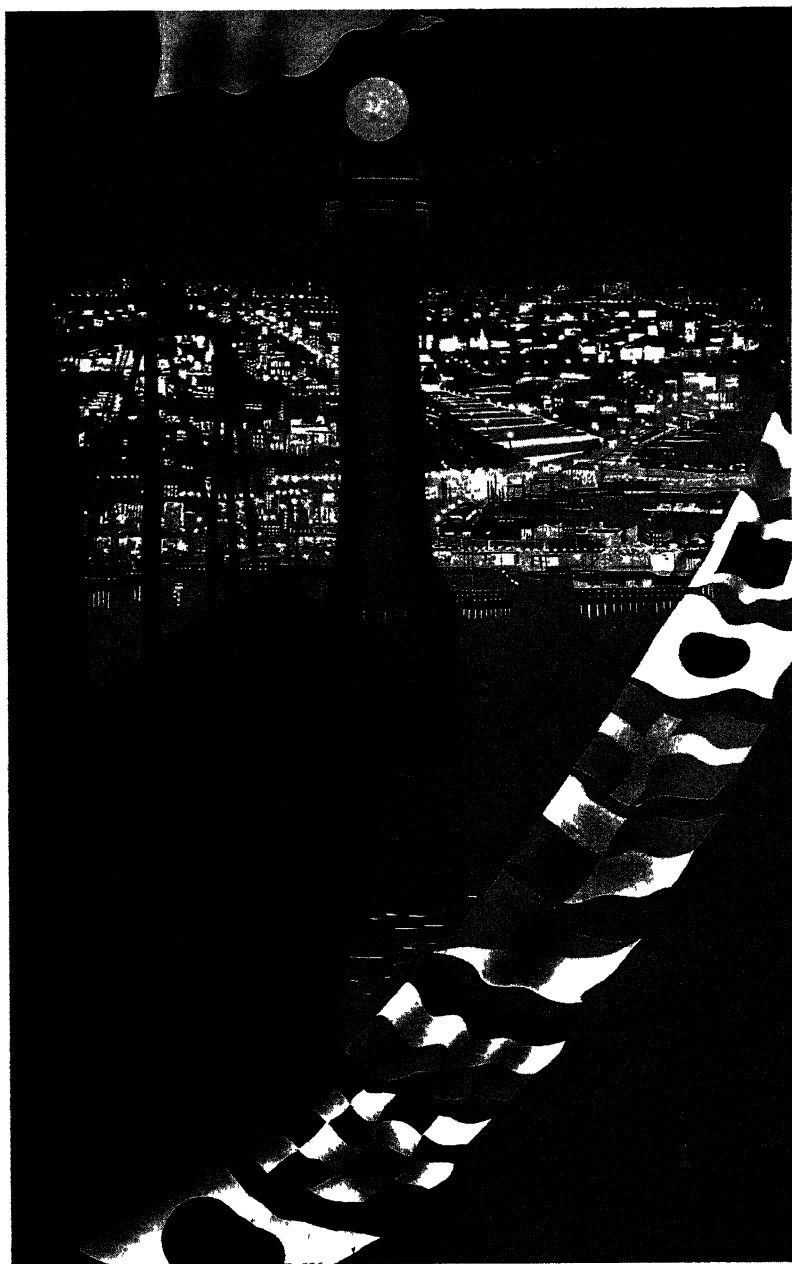
The engineer—his name was Simon—and I fled from the train the moment it came to a standstill, and man-handled

our baggage to the hotel, where the Armenian manager welcomed us with tea. He was a pleasant creature who did the work of ten men and, in addition, studied botany every night until the dawn, a habit which evidently precluded him from shaving in the mornings. On the wall of his office hung a huge poster of Erivan at which he looked, with a homesick sigh, every few minutes.

We explained to him about George and Jane, and how they liked rice and eggs and hot water with salt in it, and then slipped out into the garden at the back to drink our tea in peace. After all, we had to sail for Yalta in the S.S. *Armenia* late that night, and to have our one day in Batum ruined by George and Jane was a little too much. Besides, the Armenian manager had some English, so they would not be quite helpless. Presently I heard the unmistakable twang of George's voice inquiring for the English lady, and the manager's reply: "She has gone out for the day," an absurd statement since George knew full well I could only have arrived a moment ago. Jane saved the situation, so far as I could hear, by announcing that her duodenum had given way on her again, and when feet mounted the stairs we tiptoed back through the hotel and into the car which was waiting for us at the front door. The driver was a young boy, gay and sweet-natured, with a most infectious laugh. "The other lady is sick: fancy being sick in weather like this! Shall we go to Green Cap?"

We whizzed along the front under the palm-trees, skirted the oil refineries and began to climb through tidy tea and tobacco plantations which were only in their infancy but looked very healthy. "All along this sub-tropical coast they are growing grapes, peaches, avocada pears, apricots, melons, tea, and tobacco," said Simon. "The waste of rich soil used to be pitiable, but now every inch is under cultivation."

We drew up at large gates, paid several kopeks apiece, and drove on down an avenue bordered by sixty-foot-high



ODESSA HARBOUR

magnolia trees in full bloom. This was Green Cap, the Botanical Gardens of Batum and, in my opinion, a place infinitely more beautiful than the more famous gardens at Tiflis. For here there were flowers in masses, great clumps of different coloured hydrangeas, passion flowers on bamboo pergolas, feathery strands of mimosa, huge flat bushes of gardenias that scented the hot air, acacias hanging above the red cliffs, all manner of spiky Mexican cacti, beds of night-scented stocks, every imaginable kind of rose. We left the car and walked up and down twisting paths, under redwood and eucalyptus-trees, round Japanese gardens and little lakes starred with water-lilies. At every corner we looked down on the sparkling waters of the Black Sea, for the gardens are set on a promontory, and when I came to another great bush of gardenias I knelt down and buried my face in them until the boy picked me a waxy magnolia which smelt even better.

We spent most of the day at Green Cap, Simon producing a large sausage and a hunk of bread from his capacious pockets, and the boy buying tea and fruit at a kiosk by the gates. We lay under the cypress-trees and were content.

"Can't we stay here for ever?"

Simon crushed a small piece of cypress in his hand and sniffed appreciatively. "Why not? There is no time in Russia."

No time—only the beauty of this garden set between sea and sky, and kindly courteous people who never bothered you with idiotic conversation when you didn't want it. I lay back and watched the boy running down the path with the grace of a ballet dancer. He was chasing butterflies, an occupation which would have been ridiculous for an English boy of eighteen, but which seemed all right in Russia.

Far below us a ship's siren sounded. "The *Armenia*," said Simon dreamily.

Time came back with appalling suddenness. "But she can't be sailing already?"

"No, no, she is just coming in from Odessa."

The spell was broken. Reluctantly we walked back to the car.

"Shall we bathe when we get down to Batum?"

An understanding creature, this Simon, and an excellent companion.

"I'll come too," volunteered the boy. "It is Rest Day and I know where the beach is least crowded."

We found the manager in a state of collapse. He had had a day of George and Jane who had complained steadily about food, drink, flies, heat, sanitation, and smells. Simon looked at me and giggled: "Back in Minneapolis . . ." he began.

Even the manager cheered up and insisted upon sharing a bottle of Georgian wine with us and with the head waiter, a patriarch who had two sons at Tiflis University, and a daughter who was a flight-lieutenant in the Red Army and was now engaged in Polar survey. "A very clever girl," he told me proudly. "They do not have many women in the Red Army, I assure you."

Presently we walked down to the front where the entire population of Batum were gambolling in the sea. Red Army men rushed down the stony beach, struggled out of their clothes and leapt into the water; whole families sunbathed; children swam and dived and turned somersaults; ice-cream vendors did a roaring trade. I sat down on a boulder and stripped off my jumper and skirt, but Simon regarded me with concern. "But you will not bathe in that . . . that black costume, please? Everybody will stare at you and make rude remarks."

They were already beginning to crowd round me. Hurriedly I rose, seized my garments and walked along the beach. "You and the boy will stay here," I told Simon firmly. If I was going to conform to Batum standards I was going to do so far away from anybody I knew. The tide was going out, so I picked a place where several mothers and

children sunned themselves just beside the water, removed my precious bathing-suit and ran into the sea. Unfortunately, the Black Sea has such frequent storms that it is impossible to keep sandy beaches, and at this particular spot the sharp stones crucified my feet and made a hasty advance to deep water very difficult. Floundering, blushing, sure that all Batum was staring at me, I got down on all fours and splashed my way until I reached swimming depth. I need not have bothered: Batum was engrossed in enjoying itself.

Swimming in that warm, buoyant water was sheer delight. Simon and the boy appeared near me, and we practised the crawl over a given distance, a race so popular that lots of other people joined in the fun. Then a police whistle shrilled and everybody turned to the shore where two policemen, slithering over the stones in their high boots, were pointing to the mountains and shouting to people to come out. Turning, I looked at the Caucasus: they were veiled in inky clouds which had rolled up out of a clear sky while we were swimming. "We must go in," said Simon quickly, "you have no idea what these sudden storms are like; one is helpless in them, however strongly one swims."

I headed for the shore, and had reached fairly shallow water when I espied a policeman standing just beside my heap of clothing. "Hurry up, Citizeness, hurry up"!

That was all very well, but drowning in a Black Sea storm seemed preferable to facing a Batum policeman in my present state. "Would you be so kind as to move away," I yelled back. "I am an *Angleeski* and am not accustomed to mixed bathing." The expression was feeble, but what else was one to say?

The policeman, however, was chivalry itself. Bowing and smiling, he turned a square back and I swarmed cautiously towards the shore. Just as I rose, a remarkably poor edition of Aphrodite, from the waves, I lifted my head and looked full into the horror-stricken eyes of . . . George! He fled.

I flopped into a foot of water. The policeman shouted, "Citizeness, I cannot stay here all night, I have my duty to do." Somehow I reached my garments and flung them on anyhow.

Rejoining Simon I told him about George and thought he would never stop laughing. "Back in Minneapolis there will be dreadful stories about the *Angleeski* who swam at Batum."

"I don't mind that; but if you had seen the poor man's face. He'll never get over it, and I've got to cope with Jane and her hard-boiled eggs another four days, remember."

At supper George came into the dining-room, caught sight of me, turned brick-red and looked the other way. "His wife is still resting," said the head waiter thankfully.

I noticed that George ate what was put before him that night.

II

The Russian peasant enjoys himself on long train journeys: he really spreads himself on the Volga or Black Sea steamers. The storm had passed when Simon and I bade a tender farewell to the manager, the boy, and the head waiter, and walked up the gangway of the *Armenia* on to a middle deck strewn with what looked like dead bodies. "They come aboard early," explained Simon, "so as to be sure of a good place. Then they go to sleep."

They slept everywhere; on the hatches, propped up against the walls of the first-class cabins, curled on coils of rope, wedged securely into the lifeboats, their impedimenta all around them, the eternal smell of Russia above them. "What happens if we have another storm?"

"Oh, they don't mind the wet: they are very hardy. But this is nothing; come and see the upper deck."

Half the upper deck was covered with a leaky tarpaulin,

and under this was an astonishing collection of feet, mattresses, pannikins, babies, old women, and dogs. The air was rent with snores—and smells—but the sleep of these people was very evidently peaceful and happy. From time immemorial Russians had travelled like this, and they enjoyed it so much that they ignored the spotlessly clean dining-room provided by the State for their meals. It was so much more homely to cook your own food on deck and chat to neighbours while you were doing so.

Despite the multitudes of peasants the *Armenia* was a clean, well-kept ship. Her dining-saloon and smoke-room were large, with good leather seats, a piano, and innumerable chess-tables and boxes of men. Her first-class cabins, with two berths in each, were most comfortable, and my own four-berth cabin in the second class had nothing wrong with it except the other three occupants. Always paradoxical, the Russians allowed the sexes to share sleeping compartments in trains, but on boats this was strictly forbidden even to married couples below first class, and sheep were carefully separated from goats. My three companions glared stonily when I walked in. Two were enormously fat, and the third was a wispy little woman with a clacking Georgian tongue. Only the fatter of the other two spoke Russian, so conversation was rather stilted, but they thawed when they found they could regard me as one of themselves. "For you see," the fatter one explained, "we do not like sharing cabins with foreigners as a rule; they are so particular about washing that we never can get near the basin in the mornings."

So much for my mahogany features!

Joining Simon for a glass of Narzan in the saloon I found him chuckling to himself. "It is a good thing you met George when you were coming out of the water, because Jane was so upset that they were put in separate cabins that she suggested she should share with you; but George was so horrified at the idea that he dashed off to the purser and

took a first-class cabin." He swallowed some more Narzan and added thoughtfully, "She is *coquetten*, is she not?"

I rejoiced that George had had to fish out some more roubles, and trusted that Jane would continue to coquette with Simon and leave me to the outer darkness. "You can order their meals for them," I said nastily.

Later we hung over the side watching the cargo being loaded; bales of silky cotton, crates of vegetables, barrels of *piva*. The stevedores sang as they worked and the sailors aboard took up the choruses of the folk-songs as the hold filled up. Batum was an arc of light and as we moved slowly from the shore her bay looked miraculous across the moonlit water. Above, below, and around us, Russia slept.

Jane also slept—and awakened thoroughly poppish. She was already in the saloon when I walked in and greeted me with much news of her duodenum. "I always say, you know, that being on the water does my stomach a power of good. Now listen, my dear, I'm starving, literally starving: could you . . .?"

"Hard-boiled eggs?" I interrupted.

She gave an arch squeal. "Isn't that too cute of you? Say George, fancy Mrs. Bigland remembering our hard-boiled eggs!"

George shambled forward, eyes cast down. "We mustn't presume," he said diffidently, but Jane dug him playfully in the ribs. "Well, if you're not a sobersides. D'you know, I think he ate something in that awful place we stopped at yesterday; he's been just miserable ever since."

My opinion of George rose. Very evidently he hadn't told Jane about our meeting on the beach. I said sweetly, "Are you hungry too?"

He gulped something unintelligible, but Jane assured me he needed a good breakfast.

The waiter looked incredulous when I gave the order. He brought rolls, bread, butter, jam, cheese, peaches, glasses of tea, and my omelet; but no eggs and no hot water

with salt in it. I ate stolidly and read *Izvestia* (a week old), but out of the corner of my eye I saw Jane growing restive at the next table. "Comrade," I asked, "are the *Amerikanski's* eggs not ready yet?"

He gave me a frightened look and fled, returning shortly with the request that I interviewed the cook in the galley.

The cook was large, Armenian, and very angry. He had cooked in Odessa, Yalta, Sevastopol, Theodosia, and Tuapse, but never had he cooked food for dogs.

I soothed him. "Listen Comrade, the lady is not well and it is necessary for her to have her eggs cooked in boiling water for fifteen minutes."

He rolled his eyes and leant against the stove. "She cannot eat eggs like that, Citizeness; she will die."

"Well, I can't help it, that is the way she likes them."

"I won't do it, I *could not* do it." He was a dramatic man and his gestures swept several pots to the floor with a clatter.

"Look here, give me a little pan and I will show you what I mean."

He softened. "Ah, well, if you will take the responsibility, Citizeness."

The galley was stifling, the stove an oil one which worked in mysterious ways, but while I put the water on to boil the cook shook each of the six eggs anxiously at his ear and then passed them on to me. Then we lit cigarettes and discussed the Black Sea coast as we waited patiently for the things to cook. Spooning them on to a plate at last I realized I had forgotten the glass of boiling water with salt in it. There *was* no boiling water. "Why should there be?" demanded the cook. Seizing the egg-pan he poured some of the contents into a glass and added a large pinch of salt. "She'll never know," he said comfortingly.

And I don't think she ever did.

Poor George was torn both ways. On the one hand, he liked his peculiar diet and was quite incapable of ordering

it without my aid: on the other, I am sure he felt that an immoral creature like myself was the worst possible companion for his adored and sheltered Jane. So sometimes he flashed me a frightened smile and at others avoided my gaze, an embarrassing business which sent me along to tap on Simon's door and ask him if he were coming ashore at Sukhum.

The cook followed me: "Is the *Amerikanski* still alive?"

I reassured him and he said they must be a hard race to kill.

An astonishing apparition opened Simon's door. It was female, with long straggly black hair, a strangely painted face, and a peignoir with a decayed ostrich feather collar. "Good morning, Citizeness. Did you want Comrade P——?"

This was most disturbing: Simon's *affaires* had nothing to do with me, but he just hadn't seemed that sort of man. The apparition ran on: "I came aboard at Poti, for I am an Honoured Artist of the Republic and in the summer we tour the Black Sea coastal towns. But this boat"—her language grew picturesque—"was so crowded that however much I implored the captain he refused to give me cabin-room. But I have a temper as well as he, so I stormed and raged until he gave me the other berth in this cabin. Comrade P—— was furious, but as I told him, a good citizen is always willing to help an Honoured Artist. We argued for two hours," she finished complacently; then she sniffed suddenly. "Does your face-powder come from Paris? I would give anything for powder that smelt so sweet."

Simon's tousled head appeared over her shoulder. "I shall be ready in a few minutes, and we can go bathing at Sukhum."

His companion gave a little shriek. "That is not at all the thing to do in Sukhum. You must go to see the monkey farm."

Simon said stiffly: "If you would have the goodness to get into your bunk and draw the curtains then I shall have a chance to dress."

I retreated, full of amusement, to wait for him on deck.

Going down the gangway he fulminated against the Honoured Artist. "She is worse than George and Jane, much worse. She comes from Leningrad, so she says, but I doubt that. Five o'clock this morning she woke me up with all this ridiculous tempest about no cabin. To-night she may go elsewhere."

As concession to my modesty we wore bathing costumes, and after our swim we lay and grilled ourselves on the beach underneath the acacia-trees. "The Euxine Sea," murmured Simon, and we repeated to each other the stories of the Argonauts, and he told me tales of the Turkish and Tatar invaders who had so often swept this peaceful little town, for the Black Sea coast was ever a vulnerable place, a kind of Russian Achilles' heel which, if it could be put out of action, let the conqueror march onwards to the Caucasus. Behind the town the mountains rose steeply, mile upon mile of them, reaching at last to the snowy peaks of the Main Range, but along the shore were acres and acres of tobacco and fruit, low white houses with red roofs, giant magnolias, delicate acacias, glowing poinsettias, riots of bougainvillea. . . .

The *Armenia* gave a sharp blast on her siren, and we trailed back to the busy harbour where crowds rushed hither and thither, and loud-speakers played dance tunes, and the passengers leaned over the rails screaming last-minute messages to their friends above the din. Everything here was hot and dusty and glaring, in contrast to the shady, green-fringed beach. We went aboard a little sadly, remembering George and Jane and the Honoured Artist. "Until we reach Yalta," said Simon, "let us have a holiday from these people and their quacking tongues. There are a hundred things I want to ask you about Europe, and in return I will tell you the history of this coast and take you ashore at Gagry and Sochi and, perhaps, Feodosia. Gagry especially you must see, for it is the most beautiful village in

all Russia. When I am old I should like to return to it and live there, for death would come so gently in the little valley leading up to the mountains."

Selfishly, we made a pact. We would help George and Jane through one more dinner; I would present the Honoured Artist with a box of Houbigant face-powder; then we would evade the trio with all the wile of Machiavelli.

We marched into the saloon feeling amazingly cheerful. George and Jane were waiting patiently for their mentor; the Honoured Artist was regaling then with *risqué* stories of her varied career, in a mixture of Russian and French of which, luckily, they understood not one word. "And here come the Comrades," she leered. "So anxious were they to go ashore together that they forgot all about little me."

We scowled and proceeded to cope with George and Jane's meal. To-day, they thought, they would have rice without hard-boiled eggs, but would I protest about the butter? Jane's duodenum did queer things at the mere sight of the butter. And would I see the tea was made weaker, because George really never drank anything except pure spring water, and would I . . .

I retired to the galley and stood the cook a glass of vodka. On my return Jane was well launched into description of Minneapolis in general and their home in particular. It was a lovely home: George and she had superintended every inch of its building, yes, sir, and the style was Colonial outside, but so modern inside that there weren't any corners for dust and all the furniture was chromium-plated and there were three bathrooms *with showers*. As for the little farm they had, well, we ought to see that farm! So, of course, they were used to the best of food and they both got that upset when they travelled.

"Why travel?" asked Simon simply.

George bristled. "It's the duty of every man to see the world," he announced pompously. He then gave us a list of the places visited by Jane and himself. Apart from the

luxury cruise, they had "done" every major European city, been to Mexico, Peru, and Brazil, given Canada the once-over and crossed the Atlantic in the *Queen Mary*. Could man do more?

"But this food," Simon insisted. "Do you really only eat your own pigs and chickens and drink plain water?"

"Surely," said George promptly. "Y'see, I don't believe in strong liquor, bought food, or tobacco."

Simon leaned raptly across the table. "Are you a Mormon?"

George's face was a study. Jane nearly threw a fit. Poor Simon looked bewildered. "But those are Mormon beliefs, are they not?" he asked me in Russian.

But I was disgracing myself still further by laughing immoderately.

We finished dinner in silence. With the tea the Honoured Artist took the field. Annoyed by our lack of attention, she determined to woo this without delay. Her first effort was a song in a booming contralto which brought all the peasants to the port-holes; her second was a flirtation with the hapless George (in French), wherein she informed him he was to call her "*La Belle Hélène*"; her third was a dead set at myself and the suggestion that we might share a bedroom in the Yalta Hotel "because, *mahtoushka*, it would save us so many roubles."

I said: "About that face-powder, will you come along to my cabin?"

She followed like a lamb and I left her happily smearing her face with "*Temps de Lilas*."

"There is only one thing left to do," I told Simon, "and that is to see the waiter and write down for him in Russian all the funny things that George and Jane eat."

This job finished, we made friends with the captain and spent the afternoon on the bridge, watching the glory of the coast unravelling in the distance, and the dolphins leaping in the dark blue sea.

III

Simon was right about Gagry. We reached it in the early evening, and wandered through its sleepy main street to the sheltered valley which ran up to a hill village. The people were smiling and gentle, the air full of the scent of cypress and eucalyptus, the sides of the valley covered with wild flowers. The clang and bustle of the Second Five Year Plan had left this tiny place untouched; it reminded me of a sweet old lady living out her peaceful days, looking back on her long life with eyes grown just a little dim, a little blurred, so that any harsh memories shaded into happy ones. In the hill village folk sat outside their doors cooking their evening meal, the blue wood smoke rising straight in the windless air. For the Caucasus loved Gagry also, and shielded her from the winds of north and east, while even the sea, so Simon told me, seldom showed its anger to her little harbour. We left Gagry with regret, and as the *Armenia* turned out to sea again we gazed at her from the rail, a shining jewel set against the emerald of her valley.

The warm night fell softly on the sea, and the upper deck hummed into life as the peasants set about preparations for supper. One girl with what I supposed was a baby swaddled in any amount of shawls, looked so ill that I asked the captain about her. "Her baby was born early this morning," he replied. "But she is all right. She gets off at Sochi."

I sought out the ship's doctor, and he laughed at my consternation. "She is very strong and has worked in the fields all her life. This is her third child; do not worry about her, Citizeness."

But I did worry, until I saw her sauntering down the gangway at Sochi as though she hadn't a care in the world.

Sochi was more sophisticated than any port we had yet seen. The hotels were white palaces, and the sanatoria glittered in the moonlight, and bands played in the gardens and loud-speakers blared everywhere. The town itself was

beautiful, but it seemed a little strident, as though it were terribly conscious of being known as the pearl of the Black Sea Riviera. Swimming in Sochi bay under the moon I felt kindlier towards her, but I was never to feel for her the haunting nostalgia I knew, and still know, for Gagri.

That night Simon and I supped at midnight and rejoiced to see "*La Belle Helène*" quaffing wine with two Armenians. "Those *Amerikanskis*," said the waiter crossly, "did not want any of the dishes you wrote down."

"What *did* they want, then?"

"*Bortsch* and turkey."

We stared at him, open-mouthed. Whatever would Jane's duodenum say to that?

Back in my cabin the heat was intolerable, so I flung the port wide and hopped into my bunk. From a sound sleep I was awakened by my three irate companions, who never came to bed before 4 a.m., cursing me for doing such a thing. Did I not know that thieves abounded on the Black Sea steamers? I said: "But no able-bodied thief could ever squeeze through that port, even if there is a foothold beneath it, which I doubt." That was not the point; peasants had even been known to make fishing-rods and hook precious gems from people's tables. The whole argument was absurd. We hadn't a precious gem between the four of us and as I, the most careless woman in Europe, had travelled all through Russia without losing so much as a Kirby Grip I wasn't too ready to believe this fable of thieves. Just as I was dropping off again a tragic voice hissed: "Citizeness, your little sack has gone!"

Those dratted bulbs! I leapt up in a frenzy and crawled under the lower bunks. . . . No sign of the sack. The four of us searched frantically, cannoning into each other in the confined space. . . . Still no bulbs. Oh, well, I should have to explain to Mackenzie when I reached home; but for the rest of the night I tossed and turned, planning a wholesale

search among the upper-deckites in the morning, while every minute the atmosphere in the cabin grew worse. When I got up and lifted the lid of the basin to wash there was the sack, neatly squeezed into it by the stewardess.

From the deck the sea looked choppy, very different from the blue mirror of yesterday. "It is nothing," said Simon; "we are nearing Novorossiisk."

I looked towards the shore and knew panic. My beloved Caucasus had vanished in the night and some bare, brown hills had taken their places. The town itself seemed an ugly, sprawling place with great buildings right down to the water's edge. "Those are silos for the grain, for here is the biggest granary in Russia. All our wheat is exported from Novorossiisk."

"Why do they call it New Russia?"

"Ah, the Turks gave it that name centuries ago. They and the Tatars quarrelled over it continually, for it was a very important strategic centre, so near the Sea of Azov and the rich lands by the Don. We will go ashore, but I warn you the wind will blow the hair from your head."

Never had I known such wind as blew in Novorossiisk. It swept hot and dry from the north and swirled madly along the streets, raising clouds of dust that stuck to eyes, mouth, and throat. You walked knee-deep in dust, and when an ox-wagon lumbered down the main street you had to turn your back until it was passed. By the time we reached the hotel we were grey all over. "Tea," gasped Simon. But even the tea tasted dusty, and the iced cakes were black with flies. We trailed out again and made for the park, where a few derelict palms tried valiantly to hold up their heads, but here, too, the dust defeated us. We walked down to the docks—or rather, we were blown down, and pottered about queer ships, and stared at the enormous silos, and thought of the immense wealth of wheat produced by Russia. But when we spoke to each other we had to make cups of our hands and yell, so it was an exhausting

process. The siren sounded when we were a good mile from our ship. "Run," cried Simon, "run as you've never done before." In the very teeth of the gale we plunged back into the town and Simon took my hand to pull me along faster. It was a nightmare half-hour, and we panted on to the jetty, hearts thumping, ears singing, with only a minute to spare.

It took me an hour's hard labour to remove that dust.

The rest of the day was peaceful as we steamed westwards to the Crimea. The wind dropped as soon as we were out of the harbour, and the sun blazed from a cloudless sky. I lay face downwards on the deck while Simon read Pushkin. To-morrow there would be Yalta . . . somehow I wasn't too sure about Yalta. Simon was going right on to Odessa, and I should be left to struggle with George, Jane, and "*La Belle Helène*." Besides, it was supposed to be a favourite place for tourists, and with my brown skin and ragged garments I did not feel like facing my own kind.

With the morning my misgivings grew. "Couldn't I cut out Yalta and come on to Odessa?" I asked the captain.

"Ah, you must not miss Yalta, the loveliest bay on the coast. Besides, Citizeness, your Intourist voucher says a week at Yalta."

He had the bureaucratic mind: there was no moving it.

Simon came along the deck. "I have good news: George and Jane are so entranced by my descriptions of the panorama at Sevastopol, that they are going to stay there instead of at Yalta. I have told them to take the Dneipropetrovsk trip from there, so they will be safely out of your way."

I blessed him. "But the panorama is a set of murals, isn't it?"

"Yes, very beautifully done and it gives an exceedingly good idea of Crimea, but it is funny that all tourists should enthuse over it so much."

I asked hopefully if "*La Belle Helène*" had also changed her mind about Yalta; then remembered that she had a

singing engagement there so was scarcely her own mistress. Simon looked grave: "One thing I wish to say to you; do not make too great friends with Helène, she is not what we call a good citizen."

To my mind Helène was, shall we say, a lady of easy virtue who took enormous pains to convince everybody she met that temperamental artists could behave as they wished; but to Simon she was a political enemy. For the first time since I had been in Russia the spectre of treachery raised a loathsome head. Helène asked far too many pointed questions; she was known in Leningrad; she was by no means as interested in romance as she would have us believe. . . . Whether Simon was right in this estimate of her character or not, I do not know. He was sane, intellectual, shrewd; but the innate childlike spirit of the Russ may have induced him to unjust suspicion, much as a desire to play detective makes a small boy follow a perfectly innocent quarry through the streets.

Yalta came into view round the point, a lovely, smiling bay backed by dark cypresses and softly wooded hills. Every hill, every cliff, bore a white palace, for this Crimean beauty had been greatly beloved by the Tsars and the Imperial Court had come each summer to Ljvadia, with the result that many nobles built houses there. But at the moment my joy in Yalta was dimmed by the knowledge that within a short time I must say good-bye to Simon. . . .

We walked up through the old town with its clusters of white cottages, dipped down to the sea again and along the main boulevard to the hotel. Breakfast was a gloomy meal, and we sat with ears alert for sound of the *Armenia's* siren. "I wish we could have swum in Odessa's blue sea," said Simon sadly. "But next year, next year!"

The siren tooted plaintively. Long after Simon had gone I sat in the hotel garden under the acacias and wondered what I should do without his conversation, his humour,

and his kindness. At last I wandered back into the hotel and found it full of clamorous tourists, who were about to set out in a charabanc for a trip to a Rest Home. Would I join them? the manager asked. I shook my head and saw the look of relief on their faces. Russia was Russia, of course, but you didn't want to mix more than was strictly necessary with scarecrows who had clearly come from the backwoods. "It is all right," said the manager, a nice little man. "They are leaving for Sevastopol this afternoon by road. You know, they want to see the panorama."

What a blessing that panorama was.

I went up to the desk and asked the hall-porter if I could have a hot bath, a thing I had not sampled for a very long time. Surely I could, in an hour's time. Waiting in my bedroom I looked from my balcony across the incredible blue bay in which I hoped to swim later on that morning. That was one thing in Yalta's favour—I could live more or less in the water away from my fellow-men. The floor-man came to escort me to the bath. We climbed four flights of marble stairs, and he flung wide the door of a room. "Here you are, Citizeness." I gasped, and went into a cloud of steam, for a bath in Yalta has to be prepared in an enormous copper which is fed by a wood fire. When the water is hot it is tipped out into a hip-bath lined with towels—but the copper and the glowing wood ash are left in the stone-floored room, so that the heat is frightful. In my case, however, the steamy atmosphere was an advantage as it helped the accumulated dirt of weeks to ooze out of my pores. I soaked and scrubbed and washed my hair. Finally, I sat on my balcony and dried the latter. I was beginning to like Yalta.

IV

Afterwards I felt ashamed that I had arrived in this exquisite place in such frowning mood, but my first afternoon gave me a shock. Apart from George and Jane, who

didn't really count, I had lived among Russians so much that I felt *gauche* and ill at ease with Europeans and Americans. My French had gone—where I know not; my English was not much better. And that afternoon I went to Massandra vineyards in company with two French people, three English, and a selection of Americans. Tonguetied I nodded miserably at their exclamations of delight as we spiralled up the hills to Upper Massandra, that villa once built by Tsar Alexander III, who died of a form of elephantiasis and was so enormous that they had to cut a whole window out before they could remove his body. The house itself was hideous, displaying to the full the Romanoff's distressing lack of all taste, but the gardens were lovely, and the consumptives, for whom the place was now a sanatorium, sunned themselves on long chairs.

I was staring out of a bow window at the glory of Yalta bay when an Englishman came up to me. "Lovely view?"

I said, "Yes."

"By God, what a place in which to write!"

"Write in this lotus-eater's paradise? I couldn't write a line here if I tried."

He gave me a condescending glance. "Ah, but you see, I am an author—not that you would understand my books, because they are tremendously deep and concern political economy. Now a view like this inspires me! I remember once, in Bombay, writing 75,000 words in a week-end, sitting before a view just like this."

I asked him faintly what his name was: I had never heard of it. But a monster who could write 75,000 words on political economy while staring at Yalta bay deserved worse than death. He moved away, annoyed at my stupidity, and a book slid from beneath his arm. I picked it up—and stood transfixed. It was a cheap edition of a light novel of my own! "Thank you." He snatched it hurriedly.

I didn't say anything. The unkindest cut of all was that it was the first time I'd ever seen *anybody* with one of my

novels, except a woman on a cross-Channel steamer, and she was asleep with the book upside down on her lap.

We trooped down to Massandra proper, and made a tour of the famous wine-cellars, where the guide showed us brandy two hundred years old and a bottle of Tokay bottled by an ancient Tsar. Once upon a time Massandra had been a gold-mine to that enterprising nobleman, Count Vorontsov, but during the Civil War the Whites had raided it and taken much booty. A few Red workmen, with an ingenuity which did them credit, had bricked up the tunnel containing the most precious wines, thus saving them from predatory hands. Sitting on upturned barrels in a stone-vaulted room, the tourists began quarrelling as to whether or no they should expend five roubles apiece on "tasting" the wines. I could bear it no longer, so proffered the roubles and suggested we should share the tastes and that they could settle with me afterwards. They brightened: that was a sound idea . . . but not so sound for me, as they left me with a glass of Marsala, which I detest, and kept the sherry and Tokay for themselves.

Back in Yalta I decided that if I was going to enjoy this heavenly place at all I would have to eschew company. But at that very moment I met Frederick and Regina. They were Russian Jews from Kiev, and had gone to America in childhood. This was their first visit home, and they were a charming couple, eager, intelligent, and amusing. Frederick coloured my day by loaning me a sheaf of *Pravdas*, and Regina suggested swimming. I stuck to them blithely until we reached Odessa.

After the free and easy atmosphere of Batum, it was a surprise to learn that bathing naked brought a fine of five roubles in Yalta. "It is for the tourists' sake," explained the manager helplessly. "They complained so much that the Government thought it wiser to make this law."

A question of pandering to golden geese in the years when the Soviets needed *valuta* (foreign currencies).

Regina took me to the Medical Beach. We trotted down steps to a turnstile where men turned left and women right into two long roofless sheds dotted with long chairs. Here a woman doctor sounded our vital organs, gave us little tickets, and told us to strip and sun-bathe face downwards. Twenty minutes later a bell pinged, and everybody turned over on to their backs. Another twenty minutes and another bell . . . time to go into the water. But what was so completely Russian was the fact that, despite these desperate precautions to segregate the sexes on land, the partition between the male and female sheds ended abruptly at the water's edge.

I swam out to two rowing boats, the occupants of which were supposed to be on guard lest swimmers got into difficulties; but although I was to spend most of the next week in Yalta bay I never once saw either of them awake. Always they were asleep on their faces, brown legs cocked high in the air.

The days drifted by, blazing hot mornings and afternoons followed by brilliant moonlit nights when the stars hung low above the shining water and the scent of magnolias lay heavy on the air. I am afraid I did not do many excursions from Yalta: the bay held me too closely. Certainly I went to Backhchissarai, old capital of the Crimean Khans, and wandered round its queer twisting streets that are enclosed in high white walls, and to Cape Fiolent, where the sea had eaten a gigantic archway in the rock, and to Ayu-Dagh, the rock resembling a bear resting beside the sea, which has an ancient legend of a beautiful princess who eloped with her lover. Her irate father followed the couple from his fortress of Gurzuf and was just on the point of catching them when the wrathful gods changed him into a stone bear, and left him crouching beside the shore for ever and a day.

And I went to Livadia, where Nikolai II and Alexandrina spent a fortune in building a hideous palace of white Inker-man stone. The imperious Alexandrina had curious ideas

in architecture, and ordered the palace itself to be designed in Italian Renaissance style; then changed her mind and added a Moorish courtyard and furnishings which are more appalling than anything known in the Victorian era. Terrible chandeliers droop from every ceiling; Louis XV chairs jostle horsehair sofas; walls are panelled in bright brown wood, carved in fussy designs of no known origin; in the huge library, Nikolai's own leather arm-chair still stands, shabby, pathetic. "But then," the Russians will tell you consolingly, "he was always full of vodka," a remark which I, personally, do not believe. Vodka or no, the poor harassed Nikolai perhaps found snatches of peace in that chair.

Up to Alexandrina's boudoir runs an outside staircase from the garden, built especially for Rasputin . . . for Livadia was only conceived in 1911. In the Moorish courtyard are white marble benches, their arms decorated with lions *couchant*, and the story goes that the architect, Krasnov, doubtless infuriated by Alexandrina's lack of taste, made these benches absolutely plain, explaining to her that they needed no ornament. Nikolai, however, thought differently. Alexandrina was spending so much money that surely they ought to have something a little more ornate than benches hewn out of marble slabs? So the savage Krasnov employed a sculptor to fashion the lions, and each one of them is the most cruel caricature of the Tsar himself. That last sentence at least is true, because I was so fascinated by those grinning, bearded heads that I gazed at them for a full hour. The architect, needless to say, was sent into exile. . . . Now, an Honoured Artist of the Soviet Union, he lives in Vladivostok.

v

It was time to leave Yalta and her loveliness, and I hated the thought of doing so. I wanted to float for always in the Black Sea, and my odyssey was, alas, nearly ended. Regina and I snuffled on our last morning at the Medical

Beach, and could not bear to look over our shoulders as the car whirled us to the boat.

On board I found Henrietta and the doctor. Henrietta came from New York City and loved Russia as much as I did; the doctor was a huge American with a gorgeous sense of humour and a tremendous interest in the Soviet Union. He had been over several times, bringing avocado pears and different kinds of grains, and teaching the Russians of the Black Sea coast how to grow them. What he didn't know about Soviet agricultural development wasn't worth knowing, so we sat on deck discussing Russia and her future.

At Sevastopol we went ashore, the doctor sniffing violently as we walked up the main street. "It's that Russian smell that gets me," he explained.

I said I had tried hard to analyse it but had never been able to do so.

He roared with laughter. "My God, girl, it's the sweet essence of putrescence."

He was right; but that didn't lessen our love for the smell.

That night we ran into a storm—and into George and Jane, who twittered aboard at Sevastopol full of their trip to the Dneiper Dam. George's fear of me was forgotten, because he had had over a week without hard-boiled eggs, and they greeted me with enthusiasm. I basely handed them over to the doctor, whose Rabelaisian anecdotes confounded them, and sought peace on the upper deck with Henrietta. When we descended the doctor was eating a large supper, but the others had retired to their cabins with remedies for sea-sickness in their tummies and prayers in their hearts. "At Odessa," I announced casually, "I'll just have the day and take the night train to Kiev."

I might have known my Russia better than that.

The storm delayed us: we arrived at Odessa exactly twenty hours late, and there were no berths on the night train to Kiev. I drove to Tovarisch K—and demanded to know the why and wherefore. "The trains are running

very late, Citizeness, but wait a few minutes." I cooled my heels on Odessa's renowned quayside steps for four hours, at the end of which time I was given a ticket for Kiev. Prancing back to the hotel I met Mitch, a Russian who spoke innumerable languages and now taught French in an American University. Mitch was a darling, and the world's best travelling companion, and he, too, was going to Kiev. "But I'm not leaving till to-morrow morning, then I'll go right through to Shepetovka."

I felt a little superior. Much better to break one's journey at Kiev. Mitch grinned: he knew too much.

Odessa irritated me. She was not Russian, but a cosmopolitan port with a thick Turkish lacquer. The thing which intrigued me most about her was the mud which people carried in little sacks from the flats outside the city. It held wonderful medicinal properties, and, apparently, the thing to do was to fetch your own and plaster yourself in the stuff from head to foot. But when night fell on the city and the marble steps were flood-lit, you saw the beauty of this strange southern harbour, gateway to the Bosphorus and the Mediterranean Sea.

The train we caught to Kiev was the train which should have left the day before, but then, as Mitch pointed out, waiting in Odessa for a train from Baku was much the same as waiting in the wilds of Yorkshire for a connection from Budapest. Henrietta, unable to get a "soft" berth despite our combined attack on authority, travelled "hard," and we kept rushing along with coats and sustenance throughout the night, much to the amusement of the attendant. I said to the doctor, "I've only got two hours to make my connection for Shepetovka at Kiev."

He said: "Give it up here and now," turned over and went to sleep.

Things which had not bothered me since I set foot in Russia began to nag. Would I get to the frontier before I had used up my few remaining meal-tickets? If I didn't,

what would I do? My money, thanks to my idiotic traipsings to Baku and Kutais, was running short, and I sat up half the night doing complicated sums showing how little I could live on while crossing Europe to Flushing. If I missed the connection at Kiev would I have enough money to wire home? What would my family think if I didn't turn up to date?

The doctor opened an eye. "Oh, chuck it," he said.

I fell asleep and had a fearful nightmare about being chained to the banks of the Dneiper.

We were three hours late into Kiev. I flung myself into the arms of an astonished Intourist man. "Comrade, the train to Shepetovka?"

"Gently, gently, Citizeness, plenty time. The train is already seven hours late."

We breathed again. "Here," said the doctor, "I'm going to get my Polish visum and come along with you. Then I can go on from Warsaw to Vienna."

"You'll never get a visum before the train goes?"

"Won't I? Watch me raising hell in Kiev."

It seemed we should have at least four more hours to wait, so we trundled off to the hotel, where I had a much-needed bath, and the doctor went to the Polish Consulate. He was a miracle, that man. He had one Russian word, "please," which he pronounced "pajallister," and he got what he wanted every time; he even got the Polish visum.

Eating our dinner in a baroque dining-hall, we were attacked by a small man with a distinctly German appearance. "Say, you going to the frontier?"

We said we were, and he sat down beside us. "Guess I'll stick to you. I'm trying to get to Berlin; my girl's a German, you know."

We froze: what a remark to make to two anti-Nazis! The doctor said: "You look a bit German yourself?"

"Me? Hell, no! My people were French. I'm a Professor of Advertising in Chicago."

He may have been anything; except French. His sympathies were all for Hitler and he belonged to the genus go-getter. He stuck to us like a burr. "Say, you seen my posters? Aren't they grand?"

We eyed them sourly. "You'll never get those through Poland *or* Germany."

He worked himself up into such a state over this remark that we wished we had kept silent.

At two o'clock we returned to the station, and sat in a baking buffet for an hour drinking cranberry-juice while the go-getter entertained us with accounts of his prowess in advertising. When we eventually climbed into the train he climbed in behind us and started making the most fatuous remarks about the Soviets. "A god-awful country; they're all lousy. Why can't they live decently, like the Nazis do? Y'know, if I'd had a chance I'd have taken a pot-shot at that Stalin. Say, did you see those wretched peasants on the Black Sea steamers, don't you think its criminal to let people live like that?"

"Nothing criminal about it. They've always sprawled about on decks and they enjoy it. If you had been in Russia before the Revolution you would realize what tremendous strides they've made."

The doctor waded into him then; and gave him a technical and true history of the past five years in Soviet Russia. But nothing could stop the go-getter. All the way to Kiev he regaled us with horrific tales of what he had seen in the Union. When we went along for supper he came too, politely informing us he had no meal-tickets left. The doctor very generously stood him a meal, but when he asked me to lend him fifty dollars until he reached Berlin, we struck.

"Why did you leave all your money in Berlin?"

"Because I damn' well wasn't going to bring it to this country."

What a man!

We chuffed into Shepetovka at nine-thirty that evening, reassuring each other that of course the Polish train would have waited for us. Stepping out on to the platform I asked the porter, "When does the train for Warsaw leave?"

He smiled blandly. "In twenty-three hours and fifty minutes, Citizeness."

Haring up the platform came a well-known figure . . . Mitch! "Didn't we always say every train in Russia was twenty-three hours and fifty minutes late?"

We sat down on our baggage and laughed till we cried.

All around us were angry tourists baiting the Intourist man. An enormous Spanish woman flapped her arms wildly and cursed Stalin, Kaganovich, Ordjonikidze, Molotov, and the entire Communist Party. A Frenchwoman wept copiously and her husband dried her tears with a bandanna handkerchief and said he must see the Consul immediately. Two Czechs groaned in unison, and the go-getter spun round like a teetotum, muttering that he plain had to reach Berlin by to-morrow night.

"Listen," gasped Mitch. "I'll tell you the best joke of all. I got out at a station where we stopped for half an hour, and they asked me to go and speak to a Chinese labourer who was sitting contemplating his navel like Buddha. He said: 'Me Wong Foo-Foo: me come S'an Tung: me waited for train home twenty years.' He was a lovely fellow; came to work on the railway, lost his papers, and has been there ever since. He's got a Russian wife and five children, he can't understand them and they can't understand him. But what's twenty-three hours and fifty minutes beside twenty years?"

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CHAPTER VIII
INTERLUDE AT SHEPETOVKA

I

I DIDN'T envy the Intourist man his job. He stood in the Bureau, which opened off the Customs shed, and struggled with Czechs, the French couple, the Spaniard, and the go-getter. "I can't help it," he kept repeating, "I can't help it."

"But where do we sleep?"

"In the International Sleeping-cars."

"Where do we eat?"

"In the station buffet."

"We can't; we have no tickets left."

He shrugged: what were twenty-four hours of starvation to a Russian? "Well, if you have no money to buy food you must go without."

"Can't we go into the town?"

"No, it is a military outpost."

"What *can* we do?"

He waved his hand in the direction of a vast forest which stretched to the north. "There is a pool in the bushes," he said simply, "perhaps you could bathe."

Mitch, the doctor, and I fled to the buffet, where we counted our resources. I had one supper ticket, one breakfast ticket, two roubles and about five or six pounds in various currencies—including the Ossetian's ten-dollar bill, which might or might not be genuine. (It was, thank heaven.) Mitch had no meal-tickets, but plenty of roubles. The doctor had a sheaf of meal-tickets but no roubles. We pooled the tickets, I trading my precious beer opener with the doctor for a dinner ticket for the morrow, Mitch selling roubles to him in exchange for food. This done, we ordered

a huge jug of *piva* and a second supper—laughing makes you hungry.

We hadn't begun to eat before the go-getter appeared. "Say, this is awful. I've got no money and no meal-tickets. What am I to do?"

Very rudely we told him to go back to Berlin, but he looked so dejected that we weakened and shared our supper with him, although he definitely didn't deserve it. The remainder of the party trailed in, miserable and whining. Never again would they visit Soviet Russia.

Mitch and I suddenly remembered Wong Foo-Foo and went into peals of laughter which drew sour glances from the others.

After supper we opened our cases, took out what we wanted for the night, and saw the Intourist man lock all baggage in the Bureau. The doctor was only worried about one thing: he had a solitary shirt, already black with grime from the train journey, to last him until Vienna.

An old attendant came along with a bobbing lantern and escorted us to our berths in the train. He liked me so much that he left me a stub of candle to light my way to bed, but when I went to help Mitch heave the doctor on to an upper berth in their compartment, the Spaniard and the Frenchwoman stole it. Getting the doctor to bed was a work of art. There were no sheets on the lower bunks, and no ladder for the upper ones, and so we offered to give him a leg up. I don't know how much he weighed; but we sweated and struggled in the darkness for fully ten minutes before we got him safely into his berth. Mitch walked back with me along the train, told the Spanish lady what he thought of her pilfering habits, and left me to cope with a combined boom in Spanish and French from two very angry women. It was a funny night altogether.

II

The morning was clear and hot. I washed in the women's cloakroom, surrounded by interested Russians who had spent the night there waiting for a train to Kiev; but the Spaniard and the Frenchwoman refused to leave the train until literally heaved out by the attendant. Even then they stood on the platform weeping and cursing Russia.

Mitch and the doctor had shaved, somehow, and looked very brisk. We decided that we must give the go-getter the slip, so hurried over our breakfast and dashed along to the Bureau for bathing-suits. Then we scrambled across the lines and made for the forest. Lots of little boys were swimming in a deep pool in a disused quarry, and with them we splashed happily most of the morning, much to the horror of some of the tourists, who peered at us from the banks. After drying ourselves, we carried our garments far into the wood, lay on the moss and talked about Russia.

"One thing worries me," said the doctor. "How is she going to build enough houses for her rapidly growing population? There's overcrowding as it is, and even though armies of men work night and day during the next few years I don't see how they can provide adequate housing for precious near two hundred million people. And another thing, their mechanization of agriculture is so advanced that in a year or two's time they won't need half the men in the fields and farms. They're going to drift to the cities, so far as I can see, but where are they going to live there, and what are they going to do?"

Mitch said: "It's the leisure problem that terrifies me. Suppose, in twenty years, they reach the four-hour day stage, what then?"

"Then they're going to want to come out into the world, and that will mean trouble and dissatisfaction," I replied.

We argued heavily. We all loved Russia and her peoples, and we all wanted them to get away with their success; but

there certainly were some pretty big snags in the way. "I'd love to write about them," sighed Mitch, "and all the amusing things, too; but I feel it would be letting them down somehow. They're such children and so lovable."

I felt guilty. (I still do.)

About two o'clock we drifted back to the buffet, where the go-getter was sitting staring at an empty plate. "Say, aren't you folks ever going to have any dinner?"

Mitch rounded on him, but he had a hide like a rhinoceros.

"Well, I can't help having no money," he remarked sulkily.

As usual he shared our food, and then insisted on following us to the far end of the platform where the peace of the afternoon was broken by the distant booming of guns. "My God," he gasped, "what's that?"

"Didn't you know," we asked him kindly, "that war broke out last night? That's why they said there wasn't a train to Poland. We're here for the duration."

He believed us. He staggered off to interview the Intourist man while we sat down on the platform and swung our legs over the side. A train came in from Poland, full of eager tourists craning their necks from the windows to see what Russia looked like. It was a pity they saw us first. We were not exactly a good advertisement for the country. The doctor had his dirty shirt, a pair of ragged, striped blue trousers, bare legs and sandshoes. Mitch had a Russian blouse which had seen better days, torn flannel bags, and no shoes of any kind. I had a filthy jumper, the grey flannel skirt which had fitted me when I was two stone lighter, and down which I had spilt butter in Warsaw, and my decrepit heelless shoes out of which both big toes stuck jauntily. We were all burned black with the sun and we must have looked a tatterdemalion trio. The tourists eyed us solemnly, nodded their heads at each other, and looked sympathetic. One of them actually threw us a Polish zloty,

over which we fought greedily. "Pajallister!" yelled the doctor, and women waved their hands to him. "They think I'm a Commissar," said Mitch, "and you my wife."

We grinned at the tourists, and hoped that some day we might read in a book about the fearsome condition of the Russian peasantry in Shepetovka station.

All of a sudden I remembered something and turned to Mitch. "You didn't leave Odessa until the morning after we did. How on earth did you turn up here on our train?"

"You poor fish. I told you I knew more about Russia than you did. I made inquiries and found out how late this train was from Baku, that's all. So I slept comfortably in bed while you jolted in a bunk, and caught you up at Kiev."

He and the doctor had a fight after that.

Night came down and we had our last supper in Russia. Our high spirits had departed, and we didn't even pay any attention to the go-getter and his foolishness. We boarded the train and leaned far out of the window. "Breathe in!" commanded Mitch.

We breathed hard until the frontier.

III

The Poles disapproved of Mackenzie's sack. "Bombs," they said; chopped each bulb neatly in half and confiscated the lot.

CHAPTER IX

THIS YEAR—NEXT YEAR . . . ?

SINCE I left Russia many things have happened. Men have been tried and shot, or been shot without trial. European papers have printed virulent articles about Stalin's purge, and the terrible state of the Union, and the deplorable cruelty of the Slav. I read the other day that my friend, General T——, with whom I danced nightly at Yalta, had been found guilty of treachery, and been condemned to death. I was not surprised: he was an elegant, clever, subtle remnant of Tsarism, and when the Government found that they could carry on without him, they dispatched him forthwith. To be an enemy of the people in Soviet Russia does not necessarily mean that one is a traitor to one's country: it may merely mean that one has become a little swollen-headed at one's own advancement.

I regret these happenings bitterly, not because they signify very much inside Russia; but because they give the rest of the world a very bad impression of her present position. If I re-visited the Union to-day, I know that I should find an improvement upon last year in living conditions, in industry, in agriculture, in everything except the Russian temperament. That, nobody will ever alter.

I think she will become a very great power if she is given peace, but I repeat once more that her mentality may defeat her ambitions in this direction. And for myself, who am neither Tsarist nor Communist, I prefer Russia as she is at present, a vast country struggling to make life happy for her people.

Men and women with far more knowledge of world affairs than I have, tell me that my ideas about Russia are all wrong. They may be, but the happiest summer of my

life was spent with Russians in their own country, and my love for her has nothing whatever to do with politics.

The black lands of the Ukraine, the rosy wall of the Kremlin, the Mountains of the Moon, the Asiatic face of Tiflis, the dark beauty of the Black Sea . . . these are the things I love in Russia, and they are not things which change. Even more I love her people, kindly, childlike, completely natural, so anxious to make one happy, so absorbed in their children.

Primitive conditions did not worry me, as readers will have discovered. Indeed, I preferred them to our own highly civilized conditions because I honestly thought they were better for a strong, growing nation.

I hope I shall go back to Russia before long, ride through the Caucasus again and swim at Batum, perhaps go to Asiatic Russia and Siberia. But even if I never achieve another laughing odyssey I can close my eyes and know again that queer, composite, revolting, yet fascinating odour, the smell of Russia.

THE END



Pictorial Map
of the
CAUCASUS

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